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# ELTHAM HOUSE



# **Eltham House**

**By**  
**Mrs. Humphry Ward**



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To  
T. H. W.

“The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction.”

■



## A FOREWORD

How far away seem the beginnings of this book! It was in the spring of 1914—the last spring of the old world, when one could still listen to the thrushes singing, and watch the blooming of the gorse and the hawthorn without that tragic intervening sense which now oppresses us of the veil of death and suffering “spread upon the face of all peoples”—that I was turning over one day some of the books about Holland House and its Circle, which stand in a favourite corner of my working-room. And it idly occurred to me to wonder what would have happened to Lord and Lady Holland if they had walked in—with their story—upon the London world of to-day—or rather yesterday. Lord Holland, in 1796, ran away with the wife of Sir Godfrey Webster, who, with difficulty and after some time, was bribed to divorce her by the surrender of her fortune. Then Lord Holland and Lady Webster were married, and entered upon their long and royal reign in Holland House. Lord Holland never seems to have suffered any social or political penalty whatever. Socially, he was one of the best liked of men, and never ceased to be so; politically, no price to be paid for what he had done was ever asked of him. He *was* the Whig party in the House of Lords; he was eagerly included

in Whig Ministries; and he went to Court as and when he pleased. Lady Holland, on the other hand, was not "called upon"; women, unless they were relations or friends made abroad, did not—at any rate, in all its early years—go to Holland House. Lady Holland had no particular reason to care; she was not a sensitive person; she was very much in love with Lord Holland, and she took an easy revenge, with wealth and an incomparable house to help her, by creating in her own drawing-room the most famous *salon* of the day attended wholly by men. It was understood and accepted that women did not visit her; but their husbands, brothers and sons coveted and schemed for her invitations.

But if these two people had gone their headlong way in the social world of which I was then thinking—the world before the war—what would have happened? That was the question that suggested itself. How are things modified in a hundred years? What would the Nonconformist conscience have to say, and all that artificially stringent opinion which is, so to speak, made by publicity and the newspapers? Are we more moral, or simply more afraid of each other? Which would suffer most *now*—the woman or the man? In the old famous story the man suffered nothing; and because he suffered nothing, the woman, also, who loved him had never any real reason—apart from moral or religious scruple—to repent her action. But in the modern world, with those instances in it we can all remember of public careers ruined or permanently hindered by private conduct, how would it be? Reproduce all Lord

Holland's advantages and more, a hundred years later, and what could an ambitious man in a similar position do with them? Could he fight through? And if not, how would the failure react on the woman?

So it was that the figure of Caroline Wing rose out of the mists that encircle one's first thoughts of a new subject; and in the dark days of last winter, those hours that could be spent in writing were entirely occupied in weaving the story of her discomfiture at the hands of circumstance—a story that for months was like “a wind-warm space” amid the horrors and griefs and tasks of the war, into which one could retreat for a little while every day and forget the newspapers. When it was done, I asked an old friend to read it, who returned it with the criticism that there was “too much beauty and too much wealth” in it. I was a little cast down, but I protested then and protest now that beauty and wealth are of the very essence of the subject, which belongs indeed to that long series of the “falls of princes”—that endless descent of “tribal lays” concerned with the ensnaring of the strong and the fortunate by the unforeseen consequences of their actions—which has occupied story-tellers since story-telling began. Moreover, without beauty and wealth, and all the other things which men and women socially desire in an old society, there would have been no story of Caroline Wing to tell. For the question which concerns *her* is: How much could the pride of life and the desire of the eyes do for this woman?—and how little? What she really desired was something intangible and spiritual which was denied her. She tried to reach and hold this

something—gallantly, like one fighting a forlorn hope—through a lavish use of the tangible and the earthly. But the weapon broke in her hands; and there could be but one end.

This was the idea of the story, and with this little prefatory word I commend it to those who may chance to read it.

MARY A. WARD.

# ELTHAM HOUSE

## CHAPTER I

"**I** TELL you, Carrie, your blessed Italy can't beat this! What stuff you did talk yesterday about an English spring!"

And Alec Wing turned round triumphantly upon his wife, as she sat beside him in the motor which had met them at Charing Cross Station. As he spoke he pointed vaguely to the gardens of St. James's Palace and Stafford House, just flushed with the first spring green, to the distant line of Piccadilly glittering under a bright April sun, to the slopes of the Green Park, bestrewn with children and loungers. London lay smiling under that most winning of all created things, a genial April day. A sudden rush of warmth had brought out all the spring flowers under the trees; and the hurrying sun-lit streets seemed to be full of people—men and women and children—in light, fresh clothes, as though one happy, renewing impulse had swept through them all.

"I notice you discreetly turn a blind eye to the Palace!" said his wife, mocking.

"Never you mind. They'll wash its face some day. Meanwhile, I don't care what you say—I jolly well prefer it to the Strozzi—or the Pitti—as a place for humans to live in!"



Caroline Wing laughed. She too was excited. She too admired this brilliant sun-warmed London. But her thoughts about it were more complex than her husband's.

"How do you know you won't regret Italy, Alec?" she asked him presently. "You may. We both may."

"How do I know—I won't regret Italy?" he repeated, in amazement. "Why, in thunder, should I regret it? Oh! I say"—he caught himself up hastily—"of course I don't mean that. We've had a ripping time—the time of our lives—you darling! As if I don't know that. But that wasn't *Italy*—that was you and me!" Catching her small hand in his big one, he crushed it boisterously. "Shouldn't we have had a ripping time anywhere, eh?" Their eyes met, and she flushed. He resumed—"And of course I loved the musty-fusty old villa too—for your sake—for everything's sake. But I think we'd had enough of it—don't you?"

"Perhaps," she said, reluctantly. Then—with a change of tone—"Yes, certainly, we'd had enough of it. Neither you nor I were born to live in a desert. But, still—well, of course, you know, Alec, we've come home to a pretty stiff fight, you and I. I don't mind—so long as you play up—old boy!" She gave him a look half proud, half laughing, the full mouth set imperiously.

Caroline Wing was twenty-eight. Her erect and confident bearing, and her radiant good looks had already attracted the notice of many passers-by, whenever the pace of the motor slackened in the traffic. Her travelling dress of blue serge showed a very slender long-limbed body, sloping shoulders, and a bare throat still brown from Italian sun. The head, in its close-fitting black hat, was heavy with rich brown hair, but

in itself small and nobly carried; the eyes, of a liquid brown with touches of grey, were of astonishing beauty; the nose, very delicate, with a sharpened point that gave a charming touch of gaiety—*espièglerie*—to the face; while the mouth, red and full-lipped, was not only lovely in line and colour, but of a singular significance and energy.

Her handsome young husband, a year older than herself, made on the spectator a no less vivid impression of restless and overflowing life; and the two together were a striking pair. They were well aware of it; well aware, also, that in circumstances and history, as well as in looks, they were no ordinary persons; and that London would very soon be alive to their coming, if it were not already inconveniently expectant.

The motor turned up Constitution Hill.

"I don't see a soul I know," said Wing, discontentedly. "They can't all be dead. You won't mind, Carrie, will you, if I telephone to a couple of fellows to come and dine?"

Caroline Wing raised her eyebrows. "The first evening? You don't know whether there'll be anything to eat!"

Then seeing a slight shadow on the face beside her, she added—"But of course, dearest—do as you like. You'll let me go to bed early?—I'm rather a rag."

"Well, it was a beastly crossing. Perhaps I won't. But I vow, Carrie, I never saw you look better than you do to-night. You may feel a rag—you don't look it."

And this time he not only pressed her hand, but would have kissed it, had she not rebuked him.

"Alec—*really!*—just as we are going into the Park! That policeman could have seen you perfectly."

"Drat him—who cares! Any other woman after

such a crossing would look dishevelled and bilious. But you turn up smiling—whatever happens.”

He looked at her with a fondness in which there was a touch of excitement. But his phrase was not apposite; for she was not smiling. He broke out impatiently—

“I tell you, darling, people are not half as Puritanical as they used to be! You’ll see. We shall have no need to do anything but sit tight, turn our backs on the people that give themselves airs, collect the decent ones, give ’em proper dinners, keep out the bores—show everybody we don’t care a twopenny d—— what they do—and in two seasons, Carrie, you’ll be the rage!”

She looked at him with a smiling shake of the head.

“Oh I dare say we’ll get along,” she said lightly. “And anyway, I shan’t go on my knees to anybody. Hullo!—aren’t we nearly there?”

She looked out eagerly.

“Yes, there’s the house!” and he pointed to a huge building, behind gates and overshadowed by trees, which appeared imposingly at the end of the Mayfair street into which they had turned.

“Good heavens, I had forgotten it looked so like a fortress!”

“The gates are rather like those of Gaza!” he admitted, laughingly. “But it’s not so bad when you get in.”

The motor drew up, and the chauffeur rang.

Instantly the ponderous gates rolled smoothly back, and, from the hidden lodge inside, a gentleman in a long livery coat reaching to his heels, and a laced hat, appeared bowing, to watch them pass.

“Alec! he comes out of the Ark!”

“It’s the old livery. My father always would

keep it up. We'll make short work of it, won't we, darling!"

His wife laughed—a little excitedly; but she had no time to reply, for behind the well-dressed youngish woman standing in the doorway, who announced herself as the "housekeeper," a young man came forward, lean, bronzed, curly-haired, with no features to speak of, and an amiable grin.

"Hullo, Alec!"

Wing jumped from the motor in delight.

"Hullo! Jim, you here! Well, that is jolly! You don't know Carrie, do you? Carrie, this is my cousin, Jim Durrant. I say, Jim, you are a brick to come and meet us like this!" And the young man slapped his cousin on the back with hearty good humour.

But Captain Durrant's attention was fixed upon the lady.

"I don't know what you'll think of my bothering you, Mrs. Wing, when you'll be wanting to rest," he said, very pink, and evidently embarrassed. "But Lord Wing made me. He said I was to come and see everything was ready for you, to come back and report to him, and to tell you that he would come round himself to see you after dinner."

"That was extremely nice of him," said the lady addressed, as she entered the house. Her colour, too, was high. "I shall be ready for anyone and anything when I've had a bath and some food. I say, what a place!"

She stopped to look round her at the marble hall crowded with pillars and statues in which they stood, and at the elaborate double staircase which rose out of it—a staircase of pretensions, much quoted among architects, the walls of which were covered alternately with niched statues and family portraits.

"Lots of room, anyway," said Captain Durrant, twisting his moustache.

"Why on earth won't Lord Wing live in it?" She brought her penetrating eyes to bear suddenly on the young man, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Sick to death of it!—I believe. Hates big rooms,—hates staircases like that—hates statues, hates everything!"

"It must certainly take a deal of living in," said Mrs. Wing thoughtfully, as she slowly ascended the stairs, while her husband, the housekeeper, and various splendid persons in livery stood colloquing below.

"Well, we've made one room quite human for you; got you tea and newspapers, and everything jolly. Lord Wing's sent flowers—and—and a gramophone."

"A *gramophone*!" Mrs. Wing paused on the first floor landing. Her eyebrows had mounted, and her look was sarcastic. "Does—does Lord Wing think that Alec and I are already tired of each other's society?"

The youth showed renewed embarrassment.

"He's gone on gramophones—and pianolas. Spent a thousand on a pianola last week. He says music would be all right if it weren't for the people who make it. Now he can get rid of them he's enchanted. These are the drawing-rooms—but I don't expect you want to look at them."

He threw open a stately mahogany door, and Caroline Wing found herself on the threshold of an immense room, shrouded in dust sheets, with other rooms opening out of it to right and left. Some of the pictures on the walls had apparently just been unveiled, and a "Dancing Girl," by Romney, one of the finest of the innumerable studies of Lady Hamilton—a magnificent full-length Reynolds of a red-coated man beside

his horse,—and a great Constable, driving the power and light of its sky through the shadows of the room, met the eyes of their new mistress.

“He said you were to arrange everything as you liked. He left it all to you. But he told the house-keeper to have a few pictures uncovered for you, so that it shouldn’t look too like a tomb.”

“Very nice of him,” said Mrs. Wing again. Then she walked deliberately through the suite of rooms, looking about her, and seeing a few shutters undone, she pulled them open and studied the garden outside. There, in the heart of Mayfair, it spread before her—the famous garden as full of spacious shade and quiet as though London lay a hundred miles away. The flower-beds on the green lawn were full of tulips; broad bands of hyacinths massed in splendid reds and blues and whites ran round the shrubberies, already delicately green, following the inlets of grass like a coast-line; while the thin plane trees just coming into leaf made a background through which distant walls and roofs were still visible which in midsummer would be completely shut out. At the end of the suite of rooms, Caroline Wing paused and faced her companion.

“No use trying to live in this house under twenty thousand a year,” she said with emphasis.

“Oh you’ll have that!—anything you want,” said Captain Durrant hastily. “Uncle Wing’s as rich as rich.”

Something however in her attitude as she turned a little from him to look at a picture challenged him to a closer examination of her, and sent various comments flying through his brain. “Handsome, by George! and a head-piece of her own!—if I’m not mistaken. She’ll want to boss it, in London—or wherever she goes. And how can she?”

Aloud he said—"You must be dog-tired. Come and see the place we've got ready for you."

And opening a side door, he led her out of the series of state drawing-rooms into some passages beyond them, finally ushering her into a room of moderate size, at sight of which Mrs. Wing drew an evident breath of relief.

Two footmen in livery, who had been arranging a tea-table, bowed nervously as the lady and gentleman appeared. Mrs. Wing walked up to them, greeted them with a few smiling words, and sent them to tell Mr. Wing that tea was ready. Then she looked about her, at the Whistler drawings on the dim grey walls—at the yellow chintz and Persian carpet.

"Who did this?—you or Lord Wing?"

"Oh, Lord Wing. I helped. You know, he's awfully fond of Alec." Then, realising that he had scarcely expressed himself with tact, he fell suddenly silent.

Caroline Wing stood erect, her hands on one of the low chairs, which were gathered invitingly round a small fire lit for welcome not for warmth, while the windows on either side of it let in the cool spring wind freely.

"I wonder—if he's going to be fond of *me*?" She looked keenly at Captain Durrant, whose difficulties were evident through his laugh.

"Naturally!—if you make Alec happy. But of course—you know—there'll be hitches."

"Hitches?" said Mrs. Wing, flushing. "Yes, that there will. However, let's have some tea! I suppose I ought to go and talk to the housekeeper. But I can't; I'm too tired. How cosy it looks!"

And she gave a glance of approval to the room and its furnishings, which tickled the young man's

nerves agreeably, as though a queen had smiled. And nothing less than queenly indeed was her movement as she walked across the floor, took off her hat and travelling-cloak, arranged her hair a little before a mirror, with her long, slender fingers, and finally took possession of the tea-table, as though by that familiar womanly act she entered upon a sovereignty which was merely her due.

"She carries it off!—my word, she does!" thought Durrant, with half-reluctant admiration.

Meanwhile he took the tea she handed him, and they began a disconnected conversation which had but little to do with the things each was bursting to say—which, however, she was too proud, and he, as yet, too shy to say. She inquired after Lord Wing, and was informed that he was at Claridge's Hotel, very well—"though he looks like a walking corpse, as usual! He won't see anybody but the two or three booksellers who collect for him—and a few of his relations—women—who don't mind being snubbed. All his old political friends declare he cuts them in the streets."

But Lord Wing, it seemed, had no intention of staying in town. He was going back to Warwickshire, as soon as he had seen his son and his son's new wife.

Mrs. Wing listened in silence. But it was a silence full of energy. The young soldier felt her, as it were, charged to the muzzle; though exactly why and how she should make this impression upon him, he could not have explained. After all, her explosion was over; it was now rather a question of picking up the pieces. Presently, as they talked, he found himself comparing some old recollections of her that haunted the back of his mind with the living woman sitting behind the tea-table. He had seen her once or twice at balls in his first youth, though he could not recall that they had



ever actually made acquaintance. But he remembered her—vividly. In white always; tall, thin, *farouche*; and in the charge of an aunt, who kept a strict eye upon her. Her people lived at Oxford, he seemed to recollect, and she used to come up to this aunt for part of the season. She was a quiet sort of girl then, with few friends; handsome of course, but nobody noticed her much. She seemed to have “come on” enormously.

“Alec! Where have you been all this time!” cried Mrs. Wing. For the door had opened, and Alec Wing stood looking at the pair at tea, his sunburnt face aglow with amusement and pleasure.

“Couldn’t help it, darling! I was having a chat with Burnett, the old house-steward here—great pal of mine. And I’ve been telephoning to some fellows——”

“Oh, but Alec!—Lord Wing’s coming, after dinner.”

“I know. I didn’t ask them for to-night. We’ll have a few to-morrow, won’t we? Well, Jim, tell me something about my papa?”

And he sat down beside his wife, evidently in top spirits, devouring her with his smiling eyes, while he attacked the tea and hot cake she handed him with a boy’s appetite.

Captain Durrant repeated the various items of news he had already given Mrs. Wing, with additions, relating to various members of the Wing family. This person was married—and that one was “broke,” or near it. Lady Murthly’s twins were having a raging season—extraordinarily pretty, both of them. The Duchess’s youngest girl was pretty too—if she weren’t a little cock-eyed. Jack Murthly had been getting into another gambling scrape—only just dragged out of it by the skin of his teeth—family awfully upset—et cetera.

Meanwhile Alec Wing sat with his elbows on the tea-table, his tea-cup in both hands, and his laughing eyes staring over it at his cousin. He was absorbed in the gossip offered him, only breaking in upon the stream occasionally with comments of his own, which drew chuckles from the captain.

But all the time Durrant's inner mind was held by the spectacle of the pair before him,—the handsome silent woman who seemed to be paying very scant attention to his talk with Alec—and the young husband. Never had he seen Alec in such splendid form. Clearly he had come home prepared to take up his old rôle of universal favourite, as though he had never laid it down. Not a trace, in his talk, of the chasm which had intervened. He seemed as unconscious, as gaily, confidently certain of himself and the world as when he first left Oxford, and began a conquering career in London—as guardsman, owner of race-horses, member of all the fashionable clubs, and withal heir to one of the oldest peerages, and an immense fortune. Alec had always been a popular creature, happy himself, and diffusing happiness; full of ability and ambition too, with a mind set on politics, according to the traditions of his family, and with every card of the great game in his hand.

And then—to do this idiotic thing! Durrant, after a joint explosion of laughter from both himself and Wing, caused by a comment of Alec's on a family of Puritanical Scotch relations they owned in common, seemed suddenly to hear in it, as it died, “the crackling of thorns under a pot.”

But it was clear that Wing had no such feelings. He presently sprang to his feet, and drawing his wife with him, went to the open window.

“I say—isn't London scrumptious? Just you sniff

it, darling!—it's good. And I declare there's something to be said, even for this pompous old barrack of a place. I used to hate it when I was a boy. But you'll put some life into it, Carrie! Look here, Jim"—he turned to his cousin—"what races are there on this week? I'm simply dying to see an English race again! And I'm dying to take Carrie to Ascot. Of course it's weeks off yet—but to whom does one write? I've forgotten all about these things?"

Durrant's fair skin flushed inconveniently.

"For the Enclosure, you mean?"

"Of course."

"Well, I suppose it's the Lord Chamberlain."

"Let's see, who is it now? I've got so stale about everything? Oh, I know, Solway, who married a first cousin of father's. Of course, I can write to him."

"You'd better not, Alec," said Mrs. Wing quietly.

It was the first time she had spoken. She lifted her beautiful eyes to her husband—smiling, but grave.

"What do you mean, Carrie?"

"You won't get them, that's all."

"*Get them!* Why, I'm a member of the Jockey Club! They elected me just three years ago—before I went out to Florence. I'd jolly well like to see anybody at Ascot stop me from going where I please!"

"Oh, *you* can go—there's no doubt about that."

"And so can you, Carrie!" he said in a troubled voice, coming to stand beside her. Durrant was sitting with his head turned away, pretending to look at an evening paper lying on a small table near—a very red, uncomfortable man.

Mrs. Wing lifted her face to her husband, with a tender, smiling look; and their eyes met.

Captain Durrant rose to go.

"Awfully sorry I can't dine with you! But you're

tired—and I've got an engagement. Hope they'll give you decent food. Lord Wing engaged the *chef* himself. So I may tell him he can come about nine?"

Husband and wife were left together. Through the thick walls and closely fitting doors of the house not much could be heard of the bustle that was in truth pervading it,—the bustle of arrival and unpacking. Yet somehow Caroline Wing's nerves were conscious of it, and of its significance. It was like the vague preparatory noises which a spectator may hear from the stage before the curtain goes up.

"My dear Alec, how on earth are we going to live in this huge place?"

Her expression, as she turned to him, was all alert, perhaps defiant, intelligence.

He threw his arms round her and kissed her passionately.

"Just as we lived in Italy! I made you happy there, you angel!—I'll make you happy here."

"We were alone there. We lived our own lives—and nobody interfered with us. And here—Alec, you know, I wasn't made for a fighter! I'm dreadfully keen to be liked—and—and spoken kindly to." She sighed, turning her lips to kiss the coat against which she was leaning as she spoke.

"So you will be liked—*adored!*—you darling. I shouldn't like to see anybody rude or rough to you! Well—of course I know there will be a certain number of stuck-up people who won't have anything to say to us. I dare say there'll be rubs. But look at all the new spirit there is abroad—about marriage and divorce! Reasonable people now look at such things reasonably. It's jolly different from what it used to be."

She only answered him indirectly.

"Friends—and *children*," she murmured. "That's what it wants, this house."

He folded her close—murmuring in answer—

"There will be children—and friends."

After a silence she said, her eyes still hidden—

"I dreamt of Carina last night. I must see her, Alec, somehow."

"You shalt, darling, you shall."

Another silence. Across Wing's features, as he stood bending over his wife, a number of different expressions chased each other, all merged in a final exhilaration. The distant sounds of Piccadilly were in his ears; and they were as march music to the soldier. London again—good old London!—grimy old London—with its movement, its chances, its daily flood of events. Love on the Tuscan hills had been delicious—love in Mayfair, with wealth, politics, ambition thrown in, and lots of jolly old friends to chum with, whatever their silly wives might do, should be better still. His pulses raced under the sheer joy of return—the Homeric "coming home," after nearly three years of exile.

"Look here!" he said at last, rousing himself and her; "you've got to change and rest, Mrs. Wing, before dinner! Don't forget we've come from Paris to-day! You've got to put on a scrummy frock too!—that Worth tea-gown I helped you choose in Paris—and look your very best, my dear, when you see my papa!"

Mrs. Wing withdrew herself from his arms.

"I rather dread it, Alec. Why has he given us this house? Why does he make us live here? I can't begin to understand. I don't believe you know yourself?"

"We'll get it out of him," he said, half grave, half laughing.

And with his hands in his pockets, whistling as he went, he left her, turning back at the door to bid her again go and lie down.

But she did not immediately obey him. The spring twilight was falling; and lights were twinkling through the trees. The garden below was all dim and rich with colour; the scents from it floated round her. For a moment as she stood there, she was seized with an anguish—a woman's savage longing for the children she has borne. Two!—and one was lying on a Tuscan hill-side, and the other had been taken from her in punishment for what the world called "sin." "*Sin!*—what is sin?" she asked herself impatiently.

The sound of a gong far away startled her. She turned, and opening a side-door—tentatively—she went back again through the great series of shrouded drawing-rooms. And, tired as she was, her step grew firmer as she moved, her stature rose. It was as though she began already to match herself against the house—to take up some challenge brooding within it.

■

## CHAPTER II

THE husband and wife dined in the vast dining-room at the back of the pillared hall, which had been hastily got ready for them. The finely carved and panelled walls were hung with family portraits, ranging back to 1600; ladies beruffed, Cavaliers in plumed hats, bad Lelys, and good Lelys; a pleasant tapestry of dim reds and blues and golds, crowned by two famous Vandycks which faced each other at either end of the room—a King Charles on horseback, and a full-length Henrietta Maria. The pictures were broken at intervals by a fine series of French Renaissance cabinets; the mantelpiece had come from a château in the Bourbonnais; and two or three priceless French busts of the *dix-huitième*—among them a Voltaire by Houdon—stood in the deeply embayed windows. Altogether a room to stir the nerves of any gentleman with the collector's mania and an adequate purse.

"My dear Alec, why did you never talk to me about this house and the things in it! I really ought to have been coached."

The servants had left the room, and Caroline Wing, in a tea-gown of shimmering white, had moved closer to her husband. The small round table at which they had dined was a mass of pale roses, and Caroline's dark head and long white neck took an added beauty from the neighbourhood of the flowers. She was dandling a cigarette with her elbows on the table. The lace sleeves

of her tea-gown as they fell back revealed hands and arms which delighted the eyes of the man beside her. He kissed the arm nearest to him, indeed, before he replied—indifferently—

“Darling, one doesn’t talk about one’s things! I’m so used to them.”

“Well, I’m not,” said Caroline firmly. “And I give you warning that if we’re to live here, I shall want to know everything about everything. I despise people who can’t talk about their own pictures.” And she waved her cigarette towards the family gallery on the walls.

Alec’s expression was first perplexed, then frankly explanatory :

“Of course I can talk about them, if you like. As a matter of fact, I know a lot about them. I could yarn away no end about most of these fellows. History’s the only thing I’m good at. That’s because it comes into politics.”

“Politics? So you’re still set on politics?”

“Naturally. It’s the first business of civilised man—after love-making!” His lips touched her brow as she leant against him. “But why do you say, ‘if we’re to live here’? Of course we’re to live here—when we’re in town. Pater’s set his heart on it—and if we want to keep friends with him, we’ve got to humour him.”

“And what about the money?” said his wife quietly. “To be poor in this house would be purgatory. I gave your cousin my views—which were lordly.”

Alec laughed. “That’s so like you, darling—you’re always so practical. You see things in a moment—which I never do. But my father—for all his oddities, is a practical man too. If he writes—‘I give you up Eltham House—and it’s my wish you should make it



your London home,'—why, of course he knows what it means, financially. And we shall soon know! He'll be here directly."

Caroline rose and began to wander around the room, looking at the pictures. He stayed where he was, partly to finish his coffee, partly to have the pleasure of looking at her from a distance. Her white moving figure, seen against the darkly rich background of the panelled and pictured wall, possessed an atmosphere and a magic which enchanted him. She moved so easily—held her head so nobly—his incomparable Carrie! What storms he had passed through to get her! But she had steered the ship. And she should go on steering it. His belief in her intelligence—her luck—was, at that moment, boundless.

"Why is there a picture missing here?" she asked presently. He crossed the room to her side.

"Ah, that's where my mother's picture used to be. Pater's taken it away. But, by Jove, he's left us Aunt Libby!"

He pointed to the other side of the fireplace. Caroline perceived there a portrait of a slight elderly lady, with a shrewd, plain face, and a lace cap. She went to look at it in silence. There was no need to ask questions. She knew, of course, that Lord Wing had lost his wife when Alec, his only child, was three years old, and that his sister Elizabeth had lived with him and kept his house, till her own death, some four or five years before this date. Alec's mother, to judge from a miniature he possessed, had been a small childish creature, with laughing brown eyes; a Ravencross to boot, and connected thereby with half the great families in England. As far as Alec knew, she and his father had been happy together; but he evidently knew very little of his mother, and Caroline had already begun to guess that, in any

intimate way, he knew and had always known very little of his father. But Aunt Libby, spinster and Evangelical, had mothered him well in his childhood, and even his comic recollections of her did her credit.

"She made me read the Bible—she hunted me to church in the country. Pater of course never went. And she made him let me be confirmed at Eton. But I was always shocking her, poor dear. Once when I was ill and feverish—I must have been a little sprat about six—she talked to me about Heaven, and I asked her whether we all went up there when we died, and she said, 'Yes, dear, I hope so.' And I began to cry, sleepily—and said I thought it was very unfair, and the dogs ought at least to have the bones. And then when I was at Eton, and seventeen, about, she was horrified at the novels I read. And there was one, which would have given her a fit if she'd known. So I covered it in brown paper and labelled it, 'Hervey's Meditations among the Tombs,' and she never found out. Poor old dear! She had a class for the servants every Sunday; and when Pater had gone to Nice, she had two or three missionary meetings in the big hall every winter; and that made her happy for the year. Pater used to laugh at her, but I suspect he missed her when she died. There was a memorial service held for her in a Whitechapel church where she used to help. And I went. It was curious. Hundreds of little servant girls—and errand boys—and mothers with babies. They really seemed cut-up."

Mrs. Wing looked at the picture, frowning a little.

"She has a strong Puritanical mouth."

"Yes, she was a sabbatical old party. But an awfully good sort. She preached at me a great deal when I was a boy. But she gave me chocolates too!"

"And she was mistress here twenty years?" said Mrs. Wing.

"She was *housekeeper* here for twenty years. She hated the house. It oppressed her. She and Pater gave two or three magnificent parties in the season—all the opera singers, and that kind of thing—but she never appeared at his dinners. It wouldn't have done. Oh they understood each other! She had no social gifts."

"Poor house!"—Caroline's tone was soft and thoughtful as she looked round the splendid room—"It seems to want something—doesn't it?"

"It wants a mistress!"—he said joyously, throwing his arm round her—"and now it's got one. Carrie, you look too divine in that dress! And those pearls on your white neck—you go to my head! But they're not good enough!—nothing you have is good enough. I wonder"—his voice hesitated—"I *wonder* what's become of my mother's jewels."

She put a finger on his lips.

"Don't ask. I don't want them!" she said peremptorily. "Wasn't that a ring? Yes!—there's someone in the hall. You see him first, Alec. I'll come back—in half an hour. He'll want to see you alone. It's awfully important this, old boy!"

"Don't I know it. Well—go away, dearest—give me half an hour, and then you come back and finish up—"

"Do you mind our having our talk here, Pater? These seem to be the only two habitable rooms—at present—this and Carrie's sitting-room. Carrie thought you and I had better have some talk without her first—she'll come down later."

"Any room does for me, my dear boy!—except"—Lord Wing turned his head from side to side, sniffing

slightly—"except for this very strong smell of pineapple. All strong scents worry me. Kindly ring and have it removed. And put out some of this electric light."

Alec obeyed. When the footman bearing the pineapple had shut the door behind him, Lord Wing sank back in the deep arm-chair of scarlet leather that Alec had placed for him, crossed his very long and thin legs, and accepted a cigarette. Alec stood on the hearth-rug, looking down upon his father, suppressing all signs of the agitation—or excitement—which in truth possessed him. He was very conscious that his father held the keys of his future; and he believed that Lord Wing had "a plan" of some kind. The question was, Should he be able to fall in with it?

The father and son were undoubtedly alike. In the prime of his young good looks, well-made and tall, with an open and fearless countenance—nose a little too small—lips a little too full—a good chin—eyes a trifle over prominent, under a beautiful brow, the brow and curls indeed of an Adonis—Alec Wing stood the challenge both of his Cavalier ancestor in hat and plumes, who towered above the mantelpiece behind him; and of his handsome father in the chair beneath him; and stood it well. Lord Wing had far more regular features than his son, a more adequate and aquiline nose, and a play of mouth subtler and more sensitive than any of which Alec was master. But Alec's young bloom carried it. None but a trained eye would have preferred the father's extraordinary distinction to the florid charm of the young man.

One of the chief elements in Lord Wing's distinction, perhaps, was that it was impossible to think of "bloom" as having, at any period, belonged to him. There were indeed many of his contemporaries living who could

remember—at the distance of half a century—a young Lord Wing, as ruddy and of as goodly a countenance as the present heir to the name. But the man who now sat looking up at his son, had been for years blanched to a most singular and ghostly whiteness. His silky hair, though still abundant, was snow-white; his features and his hands might have been carved in wax or alabaster. His lips had scarcely more colour than his cheeks. It was an aspect which in any other man would have stirred ideas of disease and death. And yet such was the force which breathed from the whole personality, such was the energy of the black eyes in the white face, that the father at seventy-four seemed not a whit less toughly and invincibly alive than his splendid son of twenty-nine. Alec indeed was well aware that his father was still in all respects his match, and as he stood waiting for what Lord Wing might say, a certain tremor ran through him.

“Well, Alec, so here you are! Quite old married people, eh? Rather more settled in your minds than when you and I met last?”

“Naturally!” said Alec, with a hesitating laugh. “If I remember right, it was the day after the trial.”

“It was. Those things are—disagreeable—even at the best. Well, that was eighteen months ago. You have been married a year. And I suppose you still think it was worth it?”

Alec Wing flushed.

“Carrie and I are as much in love as we ever were!” he said, vehemently. “You may take that, Father, for granted.”

“Of course—of course. I do take it for granted. Young men of your ability don’t do such things without good reason. My question was an idle one. I hope Caroline is well?”

"A little tired—and a little frightened—by the house!"

"The house? But she must have seen it—when she was a girl. You told me she used to stay with an aunt in Foster Street."

"She remembered the gates, of course, and the distant view of the roof that you get from outside. But she had never been inside the gates—she had no idea what a place it was."

"And she feels it will be a big job to live in it?"

"Well, yes, she does, Pater."

"That alone shows her intelligence," said Lord Wing slowly. "It *will* be a big job to live in it. But if she shirks it, she will not be the woman I think her—the woman you have described to me. Now look here, Alec—do you mind if I speak plainly?"

"Certainly not."

Lord Wing threw back his head and considered a moment, his bright eyes fixed on his son.

"You see, Alec, there is no denying that you have done a thing which—morals apart—is directly calculated to wreck the whole scheme of life on which you have set your heart from the time you were a small boy. I won't say anything of my own desires. My principle has been to make you happy. But you made up your mind from the time you got into tails at Eton, that you were going into Parliament, and—of course—going to be Prime Minister! Eton, I think, gave you a taste for debating, and then there are the traditions of the family, etc. And those traditions count for something still, even in these democratic days. A Wing going into Parliament has a pull over the ordinary Jones or Snooks. The Radicals may rage as they please, but it is so, and will be so, for some time to come. Well now, by ill-luck, you yourself have put

a considerable spoke in your own career; and the question is how to get over it."

Alec's expression showed a similar impatience to that roused in him by his wife's forebodings of the afternoon.

"Surely, Pater, you put it a good deal too strongly! Things are very different nowadays from what they were under the Evangelical tyrannies of your young days. We are in sight, too, of a new divorce law, which is going to be much less strict than the old."

"Nothing it is at all likely to contain would have given any relief to Caroline—and you—so far as I can learn." The tone was deliberate.

"I don't quite follow you," said Alec, uncomfortably.

"You see, my dear fellow, there is no doubt that yours was a bad case. Caroline's plea is that Sir John Marsworth was impossible to live with, and made her miserable. But the misfortune is that he was and is a man of immaculate reputation, that she had no cause of complaint against him that any ordinary mortal could understand, and that the case was in fact undefended. There were also aggravating circumstances, which I find weigh abominably with the women—the desertion of the children—the death of the little boy——"

"What responsibility had Caroline for that?" Alec broke out hotly.

Lord Wing waved a deprecating hand. In the now dim lighting of the room his ghostly aspect had grown more ghostly, the ethereal whiteness of the head and face more strange.

"No doubt—none whatever! But you know what the public is—what women are. It is their tongues that do the mischief. At any rate you may take it

from me—I should of course put these things more gently to Caroline—that public opinion is hostile—disagreeably hostile.”

The speaker paused a moment, and Alec, whose aspect was one of increasing irritation, did not reply.

Lord Wing resumed—

“You wrote me from Italy that you wished to find a seat in Parliament as soon as possible, and you asked me to sound the Whips. But I have not done so—for various reasons. It is all very well, my dear boy, to talk of the ‘Evangelical tyrannies’ of my youth. I can assure you the ‘Nonconformist conscience’ of the present day runs ‘em pretty close!”

“Canting humbugs!” cried Alec, throwing away his cigarette with a vehement gesture.

“H’m”—said Lord Wing. “Perhaps. I don’t love them any more than you. But the Dissenters are an increasing force in politics just now—and unfortunately *in our party*—that’s the point. You and I with our Whig and Gladstonian traditions couldn’t be Tories, if we tried. There we are, on the Whig side of Liberalism, and there I suppose we shall stay. As a family we don’t understand ‘ratting.’ But the Dissenters, with us, are the tail which at present is wagging the dog. They are the ‘purity’ party, *par excellence*, and, as you know, they have got their backs up rather particularly high just now, because of the C—— case on the other side—and other things. I am afraid they’ve power enough to make things very hot for you, my dear boy, in any constituency, for a good while to come. So, all things considered, I did *not* go to the Whips.—Those cigarettes of yours are A1.”

And without any change of manner or voice, Lord Wing held out his hand for another.

“And you suppose I’m going to sit down under this



damned Pharisaism!" said Alec, furiously, after a moment.

"Ah there we come to the point!" Not at all. But you can only get what you want, my dear Alec, by fighting—*fighting hard*—and that's what I'm here to impress upon you. Hence my discouraging remarks. Recognise your situation—locate your enemies—and then go for them—hammer and tongs! That's why I've given you this house—though to be quite honest I was heartily sick of the bother of it long ago. And that's why I'm ready to supply you with any amount of money—in reason—to enable you to make use of it. You understand?"

"I suppose I do," said the other, unwillingly. "We are to *bribe* Society to forgive us?"

"Damn Society!" said Lord Wing contemptuously. "As if it were worth buying—for itself—at any price! No—but I gather from your recent letters to me that you want a perfectly definite thing. You want to find yourself in the House of Commons—and ultimately in a Government. And unfortunately this social and political world, on which you must depend, is against you—will very stubbornly set its chin against you. *Ergo*, you must propitiate your world, or rather—your wife must. It's she who'll have to do the greater part of it. Can she?"

Lord Wing rose, looking keenly at his son.

"Well—wait till you see her, Pater!" said Alec proudly.

"I take it on your word."—The tone was courtly. "You and she, then, can make this house one of the most powerful centres in London if you set your minds to it. You can certainly pull the political strings—and some of the social ones. After all, the women of our family will stand by you; at least some of them. But

don't worry about the women. Go to the men! They'll come. Carrie will capture them; and gradually you'll find the way open. But for heaven's sake don't rush it, and don't bother for a constituency for months to come. These fellows—the present Government—are in for another year and more—probably two years—safe. Now then for practical matters. How much money do you want?"

"I leave it to you, sir! You've always been most awfully generous. Anything you say will do for us."

The young fellow spoke with the frank effusiveness which had made him so easily popular at school and college. Lord Wing smiled, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Well I'm pretty well off just now. My broker did well for me in Kafirs last week—uncommonly well—I netted a big sum. And those Canadian mines have been doing splendidly. By the way, I sent thirty thousand to your account yesterday."

Alec opened his eyes wide—and laughed.

"Upon my word, Pater, when you do a thing, you do it!"

"And now what about Carrie's jewels? Is she properly provided?" The voice was short and business like.

"She has a few nice things—not very much."

Alec looked a little askance at his father. The recollection of some of the famous jewels he knew his young mother to have possessed was running in his mind. They must be still in his father's keeping. But Lord Wing made no allusion to them.

"Ah, well, I have set aside a considerable sum—for this object also. I thought that your wife would probably require it. That's all right. You and she can choose them at your leisure. Anything else you

want, my dear boy—let me know. Now, where's your fair lady? Ah!—one word of advice. Tell Carrie not to be too sensitive! She shall queen it—I promise you. But for your sake, she must sometimes know how to take an affront—and take it smiling. After all, you and she have broken the whistle—you'll have to pay *something* for it! Well, now then, go and find her."

Lord Wing was pacing the long room with his hands behind him, when the sound of a footstep made him turn—and he saw his daughter-in-law standing before him. Alec had left them alone. In a flash the old man's eyes took in the beauty of the woman Alec had so unlawfully captured. Beauty!—and—what is much more important in a fastidious society, charm, manner, dignity. She showed no agitation at the sight of her father-in-law, and she put out her slender hand to him, with an air which delighted him.

"It is very good of you to come and see us so soon."

"But of course I came. Alec, you, and I, are partners—aren't we—in this game? Now suppose we sit down." He pushed an arm-chair towards her in which she composedly settled herself. "You must be tired?"

"A little. It was a rough crossing."

"You show no signs of it," he said pleasantly, his keen look studying her all the time.

A little desultory talk followed, about their journey, their arrival, and the servants Lord Wing had provided. The *chef*—was he decent?

"Too good!" said Carrie, with a laugh. "Alec will put on weight again—which will make him miserable."

"He looks in splendid condition. So you have had a good time at your villa? Where was it exactly?"

"In the Apuan Alps—just north of Lucca. We had glorious views over Lucca and Pisa—to the sea—on fine days."

"Quite in the wilds?"

"We never saw an English person!"

"And you kept Alec happy?"

Then he saw her look change.

"I believe so," she said quietly. "Do you think it's so difficult to make him happy?"

"Not to make him happy," said Lord Wing, with slight emphasis. "Sometimes—to *keep* him happy is not so easy."

"You think him such a changeable creature?" Carrie's smile was lightness itself. But her companion thought he perceived some quick attention in the brown eyes.

"Not more so than the average man. But the average man—is not the average woman."

The smile which accompanied the words seemed to Caroline Wing as cold as the icy whiteness of the old man's features. A vague pang struck through her. But she gave no sign of it.

"Of course it was natural that Alec should want to come home, and of course I encouraged it."

"Perfectly. But—now may I speak plainly to you—as I have done to Alec?"

Carrie nodded in silence. Lord Wing moved his chair a little nearer, and laid a hand on the arm of hers.

"My dear—I know Alec perhaps better than you do—though I don't expect you to believe it. Alec is passionate—you have touched his passion. But he is also, young as he is, a man of affairs by nature, and tremendously ambitious. If we can't get him into politics, you and I, and carve out a career for him there, we shall both suffer. It bores me dreadfully to see him unhappy,

and it would bore me still more to feel that he had the bad manners and the bad taste to make anybody as pretty as you unhappy also."

The young woman before him bent forward.

"Oh, but we love each other!" she said impetuously, magnificently, her soul in her face.

Lord Wing looked at her—liked her—but was not quite so sure as before of her intelligence.

"I know that."—The tone was dry.—"But the point is, how can we secure the permanence of that desirable state of things. If Alec is not amused—if Alec is not taken out of himself—if you can't make his life dramatic for him in the way he understands—life among men and his equals—and give him a leading part in it, there will be the deuce to pay—for both you and me—some day."

"Was that why you sent me a gramophone?" said Carrie suddenly, her eyes sparkling.

Lord Wing laughed.

"I meant it—allegorically. *Somehow*—well or ill—you must keep Alec entertained. Remember that, when you look at the vile thing. If you take my advice, you will now turn your backs altogether on the solitude à *deux*. Your business now is to *make a life* for Alec—the kind of life he is fit for. As things are, you may find that a very tough proposition. But if you succeed——"

"And if I don't?"

"But you will succeed. Your situation reminds me oddly—you know, of course, the famous story of Holland House?—of the situation of Lord and Lady Holland, a century ago. Lord Holland ran away in Italy with Sir Godfrey Webster's wife. Webster divorced her, and the Hollands came home to face London. They had money, brains, and Holland House to do it with. So far the cases are alike. But

the great difference lies in this. Whatever penalty there was fell—heavily at first—on Lady Holland—not at all on Lord Holland. Lady Holland was boycotted—by the women—and retaliated by making Holland House the most famous gathering of men in Europe. Lord Holland paid no penalty at all, either social or political. He was welcome everywhere, and the Whig Governments, when they came along, took him in with open arms. That was before democracy—and the Dissenters. *You* also will be boycotted, by the women, but less severely—because of the feminist spirit abroad. But to get Alec into Parliament—and then into a Ministry—will require a surgical operation. I deliberately think the only person who can do it will be you!—though Alec of course must put his best foot forward. Now this is what I suggest—”

Lord Wing talked for twenty minutes. At the end of it Caroline Wing sat erect, her colour high, her brows drawn—a formidable and striking figure, instinct both with passion and will, in whom the man of mingled character beside her began to feel a very decided interest.

“I see what you mean,” she said, at last, with slow and pregnant emphasis. “I quite understand. And I agree it ought to be tried. Well—as far as I am concerned, if it can be done—it shall.”

“All right.” Lord Wing rose. “Our hands upon it. Now a parting word of warning. The women will boycott *you*—but they will run after Alec—all the more, because they will be able to leave you out. And Alec is not averse to being flattered. Be on your guard. And keep your temper—and your head. As to the women of our family, you will find them in two camps. The Duchess is, or will be, your friend. Lady Theodora is on the war-path. But I shall be two days more in town

—before I go north. There will be time to talk over details, to show you the lie of the land. London of course is humming with talk about you. That you must expect. Now both you and I must go and rest. Ah, Alec, my boy!”—as Alec re-entered the room—“Good night. Your wife and I have signed a treaty of London. Send her to bed. Good night.”

Alec Wing accompanied his father to the door. On the step Lord Wing turned—

“Tell Caroline about the jewels. I shall send a man to her with some pretty things—to-morrow morning.” Alec hesitated.

“Aren’t there some things belonging to the family, Pater, that might save your money?”

“Not at all—not at all!” said Lord Wing gaily. “New gauds for new necks! Good night.”

Alec, as he led his wife upstairs, repeated his father’s message as to the jewels—adding indiscreetly—

“I suggested there might be something in the family treasures—but he didn’t see it.”

Carrie was silent. Hand in hand, they climbed the wide staircase, while a footman beneath them began to put out some of the lights among the pillars of the hall. The impression as the hard glitter of the too white marble sank into shadow, and the heavy gold of the roof disappeared, was one of instant relief—as when a glare is shut out.

“Rather like a Ritz hotel, isn’t it?” said Alec looking down. “When this house was built—some—where about 1800, I believe—this kind of thing, I suppose, was called ‘princely.’ The architects bagged it from Versailles. Now the hotels can do it better. . . . We’re in the left wing, aren’t we? I swear I’ve forgotten how to find my way.”

In the distance of a long corridor, Carrie saw her maid hovering, as though to guide her through the labyrinthine place. They passed through lines of closed doors, across vistas of regions unexplored; and it was to Caroline as though the great empty palace watched her, jealously, murmuring to itself.

Her maid threw open a door, and Carrie entered the luxurious room with which she had already made perfunctory acquaintance. Lord Wing had furnished the whole suite anew; and the colour and decoration of bedroom, dressing-room and bath-room had been designed by a woman decorator, who was the rage of the moment, and had given sleepless nights to the artistic renovation of the west wing.

As she looked round its costly simplicity, its cunning bareness, where every object on the deep-piled carpet—bed or cabinet or table—had belonged to some historic collection, and not one *meuble* was allowed to hide the exquisite quality of its neighbour, Caroline Wing felt a sudden wild longing for her room in the ramshackle Tuscan villa, the vast canopied beds, the curtains of old yellow or blue watered silk, the coarse abundant linen, the old mirrors, tarnished and cracked, the queer eighteenth century pictures, the bare brick floors, with their strips of gay though faded carpet beside the beds—aye, even that *cattiva bestia* running up the wall—the first scorpion lured out of its hole by the first heat. . . . What happiness!—ye gods, what happiness!—mingled always with that recurrent anguish, that vision of a little white bed—a child's head on the pillow.

The maid was soon dismissed, and Carrie in a thirst for air threw the window open to the moonlit garden, and the sudden spring warmth.



She had quite done with her passing fit of homesickness for Italy. Her mood was hardening, her spirit rising. She sat, now, listening for her lover, every nerve alert, and all her senses on the watch. She had forfeited her children, and broken an honest man; she had gone through those agonies which lay shut away in the innermost cells of memory—all for Alec. She had lost her place in the world of honourable women—for Alec.

And now her conversation with Lord Wing had brought her face to face with further possibilities which she had already guessed, and must at last reckon with calmly. Alec—his mere presence—was enough for her; but if she were to make herself and her love enough for Alec, it could only be—it seemed—by letting in that world again which they had both defied, and helping him to reconquer it.

Beyond the garden, a ball was going on in a large house within a stone's throw of Piccadilly. The waltz-music pulsed through the night, challenging all the youth in Carrie; all her love of life, all her passion for success. And, meanwhile, her heart thirsted for Alec's knock at her door—for his step beside her—in a kind of terror. Some mysterious force seemed to be lying in wait—coiled in the recesses of the great house—to avenge upon her what she and Alec had done. It was as though Lord Wing had shown her its dim presence couchant in the darkness of the future. . . . The next moment, she was in Alec's arms, as he knelt beside her; and all doubts had vanished in the arrogance of a renewed and intoxicating joy.

### CHAPTER III

IT was an afternoon in May. Lady Theodora Webb had laid aside her outdoor garment, and rung the bell for afternoon tea. She was a tall and thin woman verging towards sixty, with a long bluntly featured face, and grey hair worn in window-curtain fashion so that it framed her prominent brow and flat cheeks. She had never been handsome, but she possessed a certain stately effectiveness of which she was well aware, and on which she prided herself.

She had just been attending a charitable committee which was organising *the* costume ball of the season, and her expression was somewhat irritable and jaded. On her way home she had called at Mudie's and brought away Lady Cardigan's *Memoirs*, which now reposed on a table by the fire. For she was a devourer of memoirs, mainly because, as she said, she could always find something about her relations in them; and her family curiosity was boundless. But her mental indolence matched it. The political and historical passages in these many volumes of biography and "reminiscence," she skipped when she could; so that she had only a confused idea of the modern course of things, even of those English Ministries in which her uncles, cousins and brothers had taken more or less conspicuous parts; and she was never quite sure whether it was Dizzy or Mr. Gladstone who had said "Peace with honour." All the same she was in her way a clever woman, and

the sharpness of her tongue made her cleverness tell beyond its deserts.

She was just settling down to her tea in her cool and shaded drawing-room with a sense of well-earned repose, when she heard the front-door bell.

"How stupid! Why didn't I tell Kipping to let no one in?"

She sat up to listen in frowning suspense, which soon passed however into a look of relief.

"Oh, well, it's only Oliver."

The door opened, and a grey-haired, fresh-complexioned man, immaculately dressed, stood smiling on the threshold.

"Send me away if you don't want me. I believe you wish me at Jericho!"

"No," said Lady Theodora, with resignation, "I don't mind *you*. Come in. Kipping!—no one else—unless—well, unless it's Mrs. Whitton."

"An exception in which I support you," said Sir Oliver Lewson, shaking hands. "I have come—simply and solely—for gossip, and Mrs. Whitton understands the art, if anyone does."

"Madge can do more mischief in ten minutes than anyone else I know," said Lady Theodora, sinking back into her chair, after providing her guest. "It seems so charming—her chatter—and it is——"

"So deadly?" put in her guest, who had now leisurely taken his seat, with the air of one who meant to keep it. "Well, what is the use of a gossip without stings! Should I frequent you as I do, if you hadn't long ago given up Christian charity and that kind of nonsense?"

"Of course, I know exactly what you've come for to-day."

"I never contradict you."

"You want to hear about that woman at Eltham House."

"The man—and the woman. After all Alec counts for something. And there they are—lawfully married. Don't forget that."

"That won't help them much," said Lady Theodora, with a smooth voice, which seemed to have been dipped in gall. "I regret it, of course, for Lord Wing's sake, but the fact is I never knew public opinion so stiff about any case of the kind as it is about this one. There will be a few eccentrics, of course, who will call upon her; but as for the people who count—the boycott will be complete—simply complete."

"Poor lady! But perhaps she won't mind it. She will have Alec to make love to her—Eltham House to live in—and as much money as she chooses to ask for. One might put up with a good deal of boycotting on those terms. Have you seen Lord Wing?"

"He walked in this morning—talked preposterously, as usual. As to morality—upholding established things—well you don't expect that from Wing!"—said Lord Wing's sister-in-law, with acerbity. "He's just amusing himself with the whole business—wants to back them against the rest of us—and see what'll happen. He's given up racing—sold his stud. So here's a new excitement for him. But what can he do? He can't get Alec into Parliament, or that woman to a Drawing-room."

"You forget. We live in feminist days. There will be a party for Mrs. Wing. To be frank, I always thought Marsworth a sad stick."

"Well, if everyone might throw a husband over"—cried Lady Theodora—and then paused, applying herself with energy to the cutting of cake. Sir Oliver looked away. He did not believe Lady Theodora meant

anything personal by her outburst; but still he was glad to remember that it wanted nearly an hour to the time when Colonel Webb usually returned home from his office, and when Lady Theodora's friends generally avoided her drawing-room.

"Besides," resumed his companion angrily—"the whole circumstances were so flagrant, so abominable! Both children delicate—an untrustworthy governess—and the little boy already ill! She has that child's death on her conscience."

"I am told she tried to go back to him, and there was a terrible scene between her and Marsworth."

"I daresay. *Of course* he refused to let her see the child!"

"Hm!" said Lewson, "I don't know. There is a certain change of feeling about all that sort of thing."

"Not as far as I know! And then the audacity of her whole behaviour at Florence—flaunting her conquest in everyone's face! No attempt at concealment or reserve. A shameless creature! What chance has a modest girl against such women? They are just harpies who take the bread out of her mouth. What's the good of telling girls it pays to be virtuous, when such goings-on——"

"End in Eltham House and thirty thousand a year?" put in Sir Oliver, mildly. "Well, I warn you I am going to dine there to-morrow. I came across Alec at Brooks', and he asked me. But I want to know what Wing really thinks of her. Did you get it out of him?"

"Well, of course she's handsome—you know that," said Lady Theodora grudgingly. "And he says he thinks her clever—undeveloped, naturally—but with a head-piece. And he seems to be urging her to what I should have thought"—the speaker tossed her head—

"the very worst policy imaginable for a woman in her position—magnificent entertaining, and so on."

"Well, she seems to be taking his advice. I am beginning to hear of the Eltham House dinners, and Mrs. Wing's 'evenings' in many quarters. I felt indeed quite shut out till Alec asked me yesterday. And after dinner, to-morrow, I understand they give their first reception. Interesting to see who comes! But, of course, if you spend enough money, you can always fill your rooms."

"But that, of course, is not the least what Wing wants. He doesn't want the rabble—nobody does. What use are they? He wants the cream."

"I daresay. But what's to be the object of the entertaining? Are the young people already bored with each other?"

Lady Theodora shrugged her shoulders. "Don't ask me! I gather they are to make themselves so important and so interesting that all doors are to be opened to them—whatever they may have done."

"Including Parliament and the Cabinet—for Alec? Well, you know, it's not a bad idea—though a desperate one. But it depends upon the woman!" he repeated in meditation, his chin propped upon his hands, and those upon his stick. "And you haven't yet told me anything—that enables one to judge. Has she *charm*?"

"Well, she charmed Alec—worse luck!"

"Has she *industry*?"

"Industry! My dear Oliver, what has industry to do with a *salon*?"

"Everything! To work a *salon* properly—as some Frenchwomen have worked it—as Lady Holland worked it a hundred years ago—is a life's work. A woman must never forget it. It means remembering the habits, the whims, the prejudices of scores of touchy people—

the more important, the more touchy. What they like to eat, and drink—their birthdays, and their children's birthdays—their religious opinions, or their lack of them—and in the case of politicians, reading all their speeches! flattering all their vanities!—helping their friends, and slaying their enemies—keeping up a vast correspondence—in short, never having an hour or an opinion to yourself!”

“Good heavens!” said Lady Theodora, raising her eyebrows. “How can a woman of twenty-eight make a success of such a business? She hasn't enough knowledge of the world.”

“Ah, no:—you're wrong there. It wants youth—at the beginning. Youth—charm—money—and *work*.” He checked off the requirements on his fingers. “Well, I shall see her to-morrow, and I'll come and report. Where's the little girl?”

Lady Theodora believed that Carina, aged nine, the eldest and only surviving child of the Marsworth marriage, was with her paternal grandmother, old Lady Marsworth, in Oxfordshire. Access to her by the mother had been left entirely to the discretion of the father by the Court. As to Sir John—

“You know he has gone over?”

Sir Oliver nodded. “And is to be a Jesuit?”

“If a dispensation from his marriage can be got. They say he is now helping a Jesuit mission somewhere.”

“I believe he made her miserable—it's the way of saints,” laughed Lewson. “Well—so you don't mean to call?”

“Certainly not! I don't intend to run any risk for my girls, thank you!” said Lady Theodora, with vehemence. “If Alec likes to come here, he may.”

“The Duchess, I hear, intends to take them up?”

"By all means!" But a flush and some signs of agitation accompanied the words.

Sir Oliver smiled to himself. He was well aware that Lady Theodora had destined one of her plain daughters for Alec Wing, and that her moral disapproval was in part genuine, in part firmly based on her maternal disappointment.

But at this point the conversation was broken by another arrival. The butler announced "Mrs. Whitton."

Madge Whitton had taken off her gloves, accepted her tea, and sat with her pretty hands clasped upon her knee, looking from Lady Theodora to Sir Oliver in a smiling silence. She was a slight woman with a rather sallow complexion, very fair hair, bluish-grey eyes, and small white teeth. The features were delicate, the mouth especially attractive, with its smiling trick, and its alternate childishness and malice. But Mrs. Whitton was no beauty, and an ordinary woman possessing such a physique would have made little of it. Mrs. Whitton made everything of it. She was amazingly run after, and always in request. A young widow, good-looking, well-bred, and apparently well-provided, who can always be trusted to make herself agreeable, who has the independence of marriage, without the possible drawback of a dull husband, is welcome in any world. Mrs. Whitton had the best of times in London.

She was the daughter of a younger son of a great family; and in her impecunious but well-connected youth, she had learnt all the arts of social dependence, earning the luxuries she wanted by simply making herself pleasant to great relations. She helped them to write their notes, and invite their parties; she arranged the flowers, and talked to the bores; and in return Lady Rawdon, for instance, her great-aunt, gave



a ball for her coming out, and for the two years of her maiden career had paid for most of her gowns, in the hope of thereby floating a penniless girl into a satisfactory marriage. And Madge had justified all the kindness shown her by carrying off—two years after her coming out—a very substantial country squire, with a house in the Midlands, who settled a thousand a year upon his wife, and then died of typhoid fever at Venice, within twelve months of their marriage.

This sad event had been one of the chief elements in Mrs. Whitton's subsequent success. She came back to London life, haloed by a tragedy, which in her secret mind she knew to have been a release. Everybody pitied her; everybody said and thought that she looked charming and "so touching" in her black. She set up an elderly maiden cousin as housekeeper and companion, and observed all the proprieties. It was not till the proper two years after her husband's death had elapsed that her position in London life became at all clear to the crowd, although those who knew her well were aware that she had been quietly and irresistibly preparing it, almost from the first moment of her widowhood. She had various gifts. She was something of an actress, and something of an artist. She spoke French beautifully; and her dress was perfection. It may be added that her enjoyment of life was both surprising and infectious; so that, as she entered a room, people were apt to think—"Here comes an agreeable woman." And moreover, accomplished Londoner as she was, she was only seven-and-twenty. She had been married at twenty-one, and had now been a widow nearly five years.

Lady Theodora, while providing her with tea, had been all the while scanning her closely. Madge Whitton's dress was a source of frequent inspiration

to the hard-worked maid who kept the Miss Webbs respectable during the season, on small allowances. Mrs. Whitton herself was well aware of it; but in all such things she was carelessly good-natured, and it merely tickled her sense of humour to see a Paris masterpiece transformed into one of the characteristic Webbian garments.

"We were talking of the new arrivals," said Lady Theodora abruptly, having at last mastered, as she thought, the whole cut of the short silk coat which became Madge so well.

"The Wings? Have you called?"

Mrs. Whitton's bright eyes—half mocking—studied her hostess over the brim of her cup.

Lady Theodora repeated stiffly that she had not called. People might think her Puritanical and old-fashioned if they pleased.

"On the contrary, you will be quite in the fashion!" laughed Mrs. Whitton, "I don't know anybody who is going to call—the women, I mean—except the Duchess."

"A large 'except,'" said Sir Oliver. "I shouldn't wonder if the Duchess routed you all."

"Oh, no!" Lady Theodora's voice was coldly confident. "If Caroline Wing were the first—but the Duchess has taken up too many of the same sort. She doesn't count any longer—as far as influence goes."

"I called—at once," said Mrs. Whitton quietly. "I too don't count."

Lady Theodora surveyed her.

"You can do what you like. But you are very young, my dear, and you ought to take care."

"What are you afraid of—for me—dear Lady Theodora? I knew Alec Wing before I married—and the story—well, I confess it just thrills me! So few people plunge—nowadays."

"Very few women would desert their dying child for their lover—that I grant you," said Lady Theodora, grimly.

Madge Whitton clasped her hands—pleadingly—to her breast.

"Oh, but we really don't know, do we, Sir Oliver? People are so unkind—they love to believe the very worst! I don't mean you, dear lady!—of course not! You are always so kind! But don't you think people do like running a woman down—especially if she won't grovel—if she defies them? It turns them savage, when the woman refuses to wear a white sheet—like Jane Shore."

"Who was Jane Shore?" said Sir Oliver, deliberately. "Somebody else mentioned the lady to me in connection with Mrs. Wing. But I have forgotten all my history."

Mrs. Whitton laughed, a low, gurgling laugh of purest mirth.

"I heard a girl ask an undergraduate that once—on the river at Oxford. And the boy looked her full in the face, and said—quite innocently—'I don't exactly know, but I *think* she was the Maid of Orleans!'"

Even Lady Theodora laughed.

"You do tell such tales, Madge! I am sure you invented that."

"Wish I had!" said Mrs. Whitton coolly. "Well, Sir Oliver, I hear you dine there to-morrow night. So do I."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Sir Oliver surveyed her ironically. "Nobody like you, dear Mrs. Whitton, for being always in it, whether it's the start or the finish. Perhaps you know who the other guests are to be?"

"Certainly!—some of them. Alec Wing told me.

The French Ambassador and Ambassadress, the Scandinavian Minister, and wife—Mr. Llewellyn—the Duchess—two or three M.P.'s—the poet who wrote that horrible thing in the *Futurist Review* last month—Kaminski—Lord Forres—Lord Llanberris—the American naval attaché—that Russian traveller people are making such a fuss about—I know no more!”

“Not bad—for a beginning,” said Sir Oliver, reflectively. “Mrs. Wing has been six weeks in London. And—Kaminski!” He raised his eyebrows.

“Who goes nowhere, as you know, and gives herself abominable airs. But—for Mrs. Wing!—she is going to dance after dinner.”

“Like hostess, like guest!” The voice of indignant scorn was Lady Theodora’s. “*Kaminski—dancing—in that house!* It’s enough to make Aunt Libby turn in her grave!”

“Or slip in to see?” suggested Sir Oliver, slyly. “I shall think tenderly of her scandalised little ghost; I was very fond of her. And the reception afterwards?” He turned to Mrs. Whitton.

“Crowds! And I hear the most wonderful reports about the house. They have turned on that decorating woman, the American genius whom people rave about, and she has done extraordinary things in three weeks. Hangings, and carpets, and china! They say they have discovered all sorts of treasures hidden away in the house, which Lord Wing had forgotten all about. He has given *carte blanche*, and talks of coming up to-morrow to see ‘Carrie’s first rout’!”

“The more fool he!” said Lady Theodora grimly. “What good, I ask you, will all this silly display do Alec?—which is really what Wing cares about. It would have been infinitely better for Alec’s political chances, supposing he has any left, if they had kept

quiet for a time, and shown some proper feeling instead of braving us all."

Lady Theodora crossed her arms over her chest, personifying an outraged society. But the two others were incorrigibly gay. Sir Oliver pointed out that the culprits had been "keeping quiet" for two years, or thereabouts. And as life is short, they probably thought they had done enough in that direction.

"And 'proper feeling' would never have done them an ounce of good socially," threw in Mrs. Whitton. "Their only hope is—well, just brazening it out!"

Lady Theodora declared hotly that to hear them both talk one might suppose there was no question of morals, of right or wrong involved at all. These people had broken the Seventh Commandment, and "who breaks, pays."

"Hm—yes," mused Mrs. Whitton, her chin on her hand. "But you know, Lady Theodora, there really are all sorts of new ideas abroad nowadays, aren't there, on the subject of divorce and unhappy marriages? It isn't as simple as it used to be. Well, anyway, Sir Oliver and I are going to see the fun, aren't we?"

Sir Oliver and Mrs. Whitton left the house together. As they turned into St. James's Street, Lewson remarked that Lady Theodora seemed really very much upset.

"You see, she had fixed on him for Nelly!" said Mrs. Whitton, with her confiding, childish look. "You do know that, don't you, dear Sir Oliver? And it was a disappointment."

"I don't believe he ever gave either of them any reason whatever."

"Oh, no—of course not. But that doesn't matter."

"So you knew him before the scandal?"

"Oh, well—as boy and girl. There was a Commem. at Oxford—he was nineteen, and I was seventeen. We danced together night after night, and made people talk. Just a baby flirtation. He behaved absurdly—and I was a goose. But then—well, I married!"

Lewson smiled indulgently. He seemed to recognise the familiar weakness of a popular woman; the belief, that is, that all her men acquaintances had been or were still in love with her.

"And you've seen him since his return?"

"Once. We ran across each other in the Park. He's just the same dear as he always was. Trust him—always—for getting what he wants!"

They walked on, and as they passed a famous party club, Sir Oliver said:

"I hear vaguely that he's come home determined to go into politics. And I see his name down to speak at the Hull election. But you know—it'll be no good!"

"What'll you bet?" laughed his companion. "I prophesy that Alec Wing will be in Parliament before the year's out."

Lewson shook his head with energy.

"You are mistaken."

"Well, if he isn't, somebody will smart for it! Ah! here's my bus. Good-bye!"

And Sir Oliver presently caught a last glimpse of Mrs. Whitton's amused countenance, as her bus disappeared amid the traffic of Piccadilly.

He was still standing at the top of the street, when he was aware of a lady's voice calling him peremptorily by name. Looking round, he saw a motor waiting in front of a silversmith's and a hand beckoning.

"Why, Duchess, how are you?"

He approached the window of the car, and shook two fingers which were thrust out to him from within.

"What were you doing with Madge Whitton?" said a masterful voice.

"We have both been having tea with Lady Theodora."

The lady inside the car shrugged her shoulders impatiently. She was stout, with fair hair fading to white thrown back from an imposing forehead, fine features, and the look of a well-intentioned despot.

"Then I am certain you have been hearing ill of your neighbours. Theodora is really impossible, just now."

Lewson leant smiling over the window of the car.

"You and she, I understand, are on different sides, in *the* affair?"

"Of course, we are. I am, I hope, a reasonable woman, which Theodora never was, and never will be. I accept the *fait accompli*. Good heavens!—if we were all to go ferreting into each other's pasts." Two large hands flew up expressively.

"You think it is not going to make much difference to them?"

"To whom—the Wings? Of course it'll make a difference. They'll be the most interesting people in London for a good while to come. It'll be a *succès d'exécution*—one of the best there is. They'll split the rest of us into two camps, and we shall do nothing but talk about them, and quarrel about them. I'm for liberty—and I shall stand by them—now that he's married her, *bien entendu!*"

"I understand he wants to go into politics."

"Oh well, he must take advice. Wing and I shall find him a seat somehow. But of course he must wait a bit. I'm already asking him to meet people. Richard Washington, of course."

Mr. Richard Washington, a Midland manufacturer,

was at that moment leading the Liberal Opposition in the House of Commons.

"And *Mrs. Washington*?"

"Good heavens, no! But you only asked it 'to annoy.' You know that woman as well as I do. A greater Pharisee doesn't exist. She, a Liberal! She flaunts her morals as other people do their pedigrees. What's that striking?"

"Half-past six." Sir Oliver showed his watch.

"Go into that shop"—said the Duchess with quiet exasperation—"and tell my daughter in there to come out—at once!"

"What's she doing there?"

"Changing some of her hideous wedding-presents. But I can't wait any longer. I've read the whole of last night's debate"—the Duchess pointed to the *Times* beside her—"and I must get home to my letters. Fetch her!"

Sir Oliver went, smiling. Instantly, a frightened bride emerged, begging her mother for a few more minutes—to complete important negotiations. The Duchess declined, the daughter gave way—and the two drove off, leaving everything in confusion, and the shopman in a rage.

Sir Oliver walked on in meditation. The word "liberty" on the Duchess's lips always delighted him.



## CHAPTER IV

“**M**RS. WING will be down directly, sir,” said a footman.

Sir Oliver Lewson passed through the door thrown open for him, and found himself in a room on the ground floor of Eltham House, known as “The Small Library.” The large official library, so to speak, was continuous with the splendid series of drawing-rooms on the first floor, and was a room for show occasions, and otherwise little used. But “The Small Library” represented the soul of the house, if it had a soul. It contained the collection of early French and Italian books made at the beginning of the nineteenth century by a travelled and learned Lord Wing, and the warm browns and golds of their bindings, behind a brass lattice, made all other decoration superfluous. Yet over the mantelpiece a great Vandyck—a man of science, in flowing robes, and holding a skull—gathered up and concentrated all the rich tones of the room; while from the garden, a shimmer and scent of May flowers—wall-flower and narcissus—flowing in through the open windows, completed the general impression of delicacy and charm.

Sir Oliver perceived another guest already in possession; a friend and the son of friends.

“Hullo, Durrant, we are before our time! Why aren’t you at the Palace to-night—for the Drawing-room?”

"I am not on duty."

"You, I imagine, have dined here before?"

"Oh, yes, several times." But instantly, the young soldier's honest snub-nosed countenance seemed to lose something of its openness.

"I am told the *chef* is a marvel," said Sir Oliver, smiling.

"Trust Lord Wing for that!"

"What—he's responsible?"

"He captured him from Voisin's, at Christmas—bought him—literally—for some unheard-of sum—carried him over here, and has given him to Alec. Yes, he's *frightfully* good." The young man grinned.—"But he has 'nerves,' and whenever there's anything on—like a dinner party—the other servants go in peril of their lives. But Mrs. Wing knows how to manage him. He says she's the only lady he ever met who was worth cooking for."

"She understands the art?"

"She understands the importance of it," said the young man sententiously. "She seems to know what greedy pigs men are."

Sir Oliver laughed.

"Men?" he said interrogatively.

"Well, of course there aren't many women." The words came out reluctantly. "But I can tell you Mrs. Wing—Carrie—is going to be splendid. Here she is!"

The door was thrown open, and Caroline Wing entered hurriedly, with hands outstretched—first to her husband's cousin, whom she greeted now as an intimate, and then, a little more guardedly, to Lewson.

"Jim!—Sir Oliver!—How late I am! Well, anyhow I'm before the Duchess—thank Heaven! And Alec's still dressing! We've been to Henley, and

only got back half an hour ago. Please, sit down, I *am* tired."

And she subsided into a chair, her thin white arms hanging beside her, on the shiny folds of her dress, and her dark eyes dancing above the superb jewels that covered her breast.

"I can't say you look it!" said Lewson.

Sir Oliver surveyed her, indeed, with an admiration not to be concealed. A creature more radiant, more alive, he thought he had never seen. Her tall and supple body, her proud head on its long throat, the sparkle in her look, the grace in her movement which was also the grace of power and energy, as of one mistress of herself and her environment—no sensitive observer but would have found it hard to take his eyes from her. A woman with a story behind her—and—perhaps?—a story to come: that seemed to Sir Oliver the message of her personality and her beauty. He was sorry for Sir John Marsworth; and he was conscious of a secret wonder whether Alec Wing was man enough to hold her.

The room began to fill. A small whirlwind accompanied the entrance of the Duchess, fat, fair, and sixty, leaning on her stick, and taking in all the guests, with a pair of the shrewdest eyes in London.

"Well, my dear,"—this to Caroline—"so this house is lived in again. Congratulate you. Wing has neglected it shamefully for years. The last time I set foot in it, it smelt like a cellar. You seem to have done wonders. How do you do, Alec. Late as usual?"

For the young master of the house had just hurried into the room, full of apologies. He bent over her hand, smiling.

"I'm afraid you know me of old, Aunt Lucy!"

"I do." The tone was just touched with sarcasm.

Then—in his ear—"Don't you put me near that man Llewellyn—I saw him in the hall—I can't be civil to him."

Mr. Robert Llewellyn belonged to the Front Opposition Bench, and had been Financial Secretary to the Treasury in the preceding Liberal Government. The Duchess imagined herself to be a great Whig lady; but her hatred for the Radical wing of her own party was only equalled by her contempt for the "extinct volcanoes" of the other. Alec laughed.

"Trust Carrie! She has arranged it all." The Duchess's eyebrows went up as much as to say—"What can she know about it—yet?" Her nephew resumed—"You'll have to be content with me, you know, on one side—but we've given you the Scandinavian Minister on the other."

The Duchess's brow cleared.

"All right!—an agreeable man. His wife too—since she gave up the youth and beauty business. Go along, Alec—there's the Ambassador."

For the French Ambassador and his wife had that moment appeared. The Ambassador, a robust, black-haired, black-bearded man, looked extremely formidable, and had the softest possible manners, as though to make amends both for his appearance and for the revolutionary memories suggested by his name. His wife beside him, thin, ultra-refined, with large, prominent eyes, was a miracle of well-preserved elegance. She belonged to a Legitimist family who had renounced her with horror on her marriage. The Ambassador greeted Caroline with particular effusion. They had already met at the Opera, where her beauty had made an instant captive of him. As for her story, it was only an added attraction. For all *crimes passionnels*, he felt the boundless indulgence of his nation.

His wife behaved with more reserve. After a few words with the Wings, she retreated to a seat beside the Scandinavian Minister's wife, with whom she talked eagerly of the State ball the night before. But as the buzz in the room grew louder, the French Ambassadors bent over her neighbour. "Have you seen her before—Madame Wing? No? Oh, yes!"—indifferently—"she is lovely! the men rave about her. But poor thing!—what a pity! There was so much talk—at supper, last night. The Royalties have set their faces. They mean to show their opinion if they can. But indeed, there was scarcely a voice for them. Isn't it tragic? Such wealth—and such beauty! Of course we diplomats can do what we please! And I find her charming!"

The speaker put up a gold-rimmed eyeglass in a fleshless hand and watched the movements of Mrs. Wing from a distance, as she might have watched the first act of a play that promised emotions.

"Ma chère," said the excited voice of the lady beside her. "Voilà Kaminski!"

And amid a sudden hush in the now crowded room, a group round the door fell back, to let pass a singular figure—that of Eugénie Kaminski—the famous Servian dancer of the moment—herald and forerunner of a Slavonic art which had not yet dawned on London. She came in with a gliding step, swathed in some glistening white stuff, and glittering with jewels. A deep scarlet belt, and a scarlet silk cap, emphasised the audacity of the eyes, the deathly pallor of the skin, the high cheek bones, the wide nostrils, the slow, half dreamy smile of the red lips. The eyes were blackened above and below, the cheeks rouged. Something Asian and barbaric seemed to enter with her, and sent a pleasing thrill through the London drawing-room. The

Duchess rose from her seat, and hobbled as fast as she could to add her greetings to those of the Wings; the French Ambassador, Robert Llewellyn, various young peers, and diplomatic underlings, among the foremost "bloods" of the moment, hurried to the scene. With half-shut eyes, her long hands and snaky arms quivering in accompaniment to every word and change of expression, the dancer held her court.

Captain Durrant did not join it. He fidgeted, uncomfortable and frowning, in the background. He was a plain man strictly brought up in an old and pious Scotch family, who was always getting into trouble with his own moral principles. He had yielded so far as to become the friend and champion of his new cousin "Carrie." But in inviting this Servian Delilah—of whose history he, as a member of one of the Household regiments, knew more than he wanted to know—it seemed to him that Alec's wife had made a serious mistake. "It will do her harm," he said to himself, fuming. "In her position she ought to be doubly careful. A stupid blunder! I shall talk to Alec."

Meanwhile the Ambassadors was murmuring to the Duchess.

"Quelle triomphe pour Madame Wing! She goes nowhere. Only a week ago—so they told me at the Palace last night—she refused a Windsor 'command'—and quite insolently. Her little dog was ill, she said, and she could not leave him."

"Carrie!—Mrs. Whitton!"

"Am I the very, very last?" said Mrs. Whitton, throwing up her hands in dismay—"A thousand apologies, dear Mrs. Wing. I——"

But Carrie, after greeting her tardy guest, had flown at a signal from Lord Wing, who had recently entered,

and had something to whisper in her ear. Mrs. Whitton looked at her host.

"I was at Henley too. I saw you. *What* a pace you must have come home at! Were there *no* police?"

Alec was conscious, as she spoke, that her looks were extremely agreeable, though not in any way brilliant. She was dressed in black, with some fine pearls, which suited the pale fairness of her head, and the air and exercise of the afternoon had given freshness to her complexion. She was certainly distinguished, he said to himself; one would notice her anywhere. And he thought with a passing amusement of their old boy and girl flirtation at that Oxford ball—St. John's, wasn't it? He seemed to see the beautiful old garden with its fairy lamps, and the grey front of the College. She had actually let him kiss her—under the trees. What a pair of babes! He must tell Carrie about it—and make her laugh. And now, here was the poor little thing left alone; and not too well off, so it was said. Why, she couldn't be more than six or seven and twenty. It was very hard on her.

Some unspoken consciousness seemed to pass between their eyes, and she smiled.

"When one is with a future Prime Minister, you know," she continued, still softly excusing herself, "one has to do what he does. He joined us about five—just to see his son Billy row—Billy's race came on late, and I *couldn't* get away."

"Oh, you were with the Washingtons?" There was a sudden eagerness in Wing's voice. "I thought I saw him in the distance. Is he a friend of yours?"

She nodded, moving on into the crowd of the room.

"We must have a talk after dinner, mustn't we?" said Wing, following her, and perceiving at the same moment that dinner had been announced.

Mrs. Whitton looked back over her shoulder, smiling. "I shall expect you."

But her manner, though gracious, was a trifle queenly. Nothing at all in it of the "poor little thing." It and she piqued his curiosity, and when a few minutes later he found himself between the Ambassadors and the Duchess, he was still speculating about her. How had Caroline got hold of her for this dinner? He could not remember—except that he had told his wife of his chance meeting with Mrs. Whitton in the park.

"So you think there is really no chance of an election this year."

The question was Mrs. Wing's. She addressed it to her neighbour on her left, Mr. Robert Llewellyn, a gentleman holding a remarkable position in the Liberal party, and destined, it was thought, to high office, whenever the hungry "Outs" should succeed in hurling the "Ins" from place. He was a chubby-faced man of middle age, with blinking eyes, which for all their blinking were yet extraordinarily kind and straight, a large expressive mouth, and a deliberately courteous manner.

He smiled at the question and shook his head. "None whatever. And certainly our side has no reason to wish it. We are not in the least prepared."

Caroline bent her beautiful eyes upon him, and with a pretty deference quoted some opinions of a very different kind—of Mr. This, and Lord That—who thought there would and must be a general election in the autumn. She quoted them intelligently. Her voice pleased the ears beside her. But as for the opinions, they only produced a more decided head-shake, and a touch of contempt in the smile.

"These men—the present Government—are in cer-



tainly till next year—probably for two years more. I advise you not to believe any reports to the contrary. And on our side we have a great dearth of candidates—and no money.”

“Really?—a lack of candidates?”

“Undoubtedly. The constituencies grow very particular nowadays. They want either the solid respectable men, with money, and large local interests; or young men without money, good speakers—men of ability—whom it may be worth the party’s while to finance.”

“Isn’t there a third kind?” asked Caroline, smiling—“the young men of ability—*with* money?”

“Of course!—the rare birds! But it doesn’t do to reckon on too many of them. And as to money—we have plenty of rich men on our side, but they don’t do their duty; they don’t stump up—as the Tories do.”

He saw his hostess glance towards the white head of Lord Wing, conspicuous on the farther side of the round table. Then moving confidently towards Llewellyn, she said under her breath—laughter in voice and eyes—

“I hope my father-in-law stumps up! He could!”

Her neighbour looked as he felt—a little embarrassed.

“I have no doubt Lord Wing gives us all that he thinks we deserve,” he said dryly.

“I see!” said Caroline, with the same joyous animation. “Alec must talk to him.”

Llewellyn smiled at her discreetly, but without reply; and she at once changed the subject. The French Ambassador indeed claimed her, and Llewellyn who, in the vast preponderance of men, had only a young civil servant on his left, of no apparent conversational powers, listened a while to their conversation. Mrs. Wing’s French was evidently good, and the Ambassador, who was in general proud of his English, had no chance of using it. It was said indeed that he only spoke

French when his country was pursuing an aggressive policy, and it was necessary to assume that Europe had only one language worth talking. Llewellyn, who was a great student of character, presently came to the conclusion that Mrs. Wing was exceedingly intelligent, with a very considerable knowledge of books, persons, and affairs; at the same time, excitable, with indications not to be mistaken of a rash and headlong temperament, which accounted, he supposed, for the scandal and the divorce.

Then he considered the dinner-table. About five women to an intolerable deal of men; brought there, no doubt, partly by Alec Wing's personal popularity; partly by his father's prestige and immense wealth; by curiosity as to the house and the divorce; by reports of Mrs. Wing's beauty, and the *chef's* perfection; by a variety of motives, in fact, creditable or calculating.

"Why am I here?" he thought; for he was a Stoic both in philosophy and practice, quite undazzled by either money or cooks. The explanation really lay—and he knew it—in a romantic mind, which no one ever thought of suspecting in combination with his trivial nose and round cheeks. But the fact was that a woman who had risked something for love appealed to him.

Presently Mrs. Wing returned to him from the Ambassador, with that slight change of manner which flattered the English politician against his will.

"Alec will be speaking at Hull next month. I am going down with him. He laughs at me for being nervous—but I can't help it."

"Hull? The by-election?"

Mrs. Wing nodded.

"An old friend of Alec's is standing. Alec wired a few days ago to ask if he should come and help, and

they've put him on at the last big meeting before the poll. The man who's standing told me last week he never heard anybody speak so well at the Oxford Union in his time, as Alec. They were very keen to get him. He really has a great natural gift."

Llewellyn was touched by her wifely eagerness. Yes, he remembered to have heard that Alec Wing had considerable speaking talent. But, good heavens! didn't this handsome creature know how much else was concerned? She did know—she must know. He began to be angry with so much *naïveté*, or the appearance of it. If that fellow Bothwell, who was standing at Hull, was really going to put up Wing for his last important meeting, he was a great fool. The party newspapers on the other side would be lively reading for days before.

Mrs. Wing did not seem to notice his somewhat monosyllabic replies. She kept the conversation on politics, declared her own strong sympathy with the Opposition programme, and talked vivaciously of the recent debates in the House of Commons. Llewellyn gathered that she must have already secured pretty constant access to the various ladies' galleries of the House, and a rather astonishing knowledge of the party men and party relations. She congratulated him on a passage of arms he himself had had with the Home Secretary in the House the week before, and she did it so well that he could not help colouring a little, and feeling pleased. Certainly women could be sirens when they chose; and he had never yet been able to shut his ears to them.

But their talk was interrupted from the other side of the table, where the Kaminski sat among a group of admirers, by a sudden outbreak of noise, which deafened everything else. The great *danseuse*, flushed

with flattery and perhaps also with champagne, was chaffing and teasing a young Scotch peer beside her, to the delight of their neighbours. She wound up with a challenge to him to dance with her after dinner, "Oui, monsieur! — Oui, milord! — après le dîner — vous danserez avec moi!"

The splendid youth, one of the prize guardsmen of the day, half flattered—half fluttered—looked her full in the eyes, and stammered—"Je voudrais, madame—si je coudrais!"

The dinner broke up in a shriek of laughter, the French Ambassador congratulating the flushed young man on having added a new and useful verb to the French tongue.

The few ladies slowly mounted the great staircase ablaze with light and flowers, while a small but perfect orchestra hidden away among the pillars of the hall sent a swaying music after them. The Duchess turned to her hostess.

"There is no doubt of it, my dear—you have a magnificent house. I shall be curious to see what use you make of it."

Caroline flushed, but could not for the moment think of an answer. She led the way to an open doorway, and smiling stood aside for the Ambassadors and her other guests to enter.

"Superb!" said the Duchess, looking round her. To right and left stretched the long suite of drawing-rooms, new-hung, new-carpeted, but designed first and foremost as a background for the famous pictures of the family. Gainsboroughs, Romneys, Reynoldses, breathed and moved upon the walls. Beautiful children, fair women, red-coated soldiers, comely youths, and weather-beaten seamen looked smiling down upon these new

guests, who came, once more, like those of earlier generations, to do them homage. The electric lighting had been graduated by the most skilful of electricians, so that everything was illuminated, and nothing glared. The Persian carpets on the floors—old, dim and priceless—made the Duchess's mouth water. Such things were her particular passion, in which, however, she was far too frugal to indulge; and it seemed to her that her mad brother-in-law, Lord Wing, must have been spending absurdly! Her curiosity ached within her. So that after the new mistress of the house—a glittering figure in her white satin, and the jewels Lord Wing had been hanging upon her—had led a kind of royal progress through the rooms, and the women were grouped in the farthest drawing-room, where some old Chinese tapestries on a ground of pale yellow had evoked little cries of pleasure from the instructed, the Duchess no longer even pretended to take it quietly.

"You seem to be uncommonly rich, my dear!" she said, as she and Caroline sat together in a corner of the yellow room. "Lord Wing, I suppose, has been making things easy for you?"

"He has been showering money on us!" said Caroline Wing, throwing back her head, and looking full at her husband's kinswoman. "We didn't ask him. Alec, you know, has money of his own. So have I—some. But Lord Wing insisted on our living here——"

"And, of course, doing it properly? Well, it's uncommonly interesting—like a play. At the same time, my dear, you are too much a woman of the world not to know"—the speaker coughed slightly—"that in making this house a political centre—which, I understand, is what Wing is after—you'll have a good many difficulties to meet."

"I know," said Caroline, smiling. Did the Duchess suppose she was the first to say so?

"It's the women, of course. Take my sister Theodora. A potato-headed woman, I call her,—whole-some of course, but dense—no adventure in her, no give and take. And there are scores of them. But you'll have to learn to get round them, if it's true—that Alec wants a political career?"

The Duchess turned a look, sharply interrogative, on her companion.

"Why shouldn't he have a political career?" said Mrs. Wing, proudly. "It's what he's always looked forward to. They were thinking of a seat for him before he left England."

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders.

"It's the way, of course, that people have nowadays—directly a man becomes a public man—of poking their noses into all his private concerns. There are two roads, I always say, to political success in this country; one, through courting the multitude—Alec, in my belief, had better let that alone for the present!—the other through the people that count, the few score people who really *do* govern the country. That's Alec's game—if he's a sensible man. That's why I've asked him to meet the Washingtons. You weren't angry with me that I didn't ask you too?"

The Duchess laid a propitiatory hand on Caroline's knee. Mrs. Wing flushed a little, but laughed.

"Angry? It never occurred to me for a moment. Why should I be?"

"It was the only way—that Alec should drop in, and find him there. I'll take care he gets his talk. Richard Washington's an uncommonly clever fellow—the best leader we've had for a long time. Thorough middle-class, of course; but none of *our* men just now

are worth sixpence. As for his wife!"—the Duchess threw up her hands.

"A bore?" said Caroline.

"A bore to the bone!—and very large Aberdeenshire bones too. The woman looks like a dragoon. She was the daughter of a Free Kirk minister, not far from us in Perthshire, and she just bristles with the Ten Commandments. I can't abide her—but I hardly ever dare ask him without her. She governs him completely. They say she has *immense* influence with him. Both he and the sons adore her."

"Political influence?"

"All sorts. If Alec wants a chance in politics, he will just have to square her—somehow!"

"How can he, if she disapproves of us?"

The Duchess laughed.

"Because she is one of those women who can sometimes make allowances for the other sex, but never for her own."

"I see. She might forgive Alec, but not me."

The Duchess assented; then bending forward, said abruptly—

"If you take my advice, *you'll* make friends with that clever creature, Madge Whitton."

Caroline followed the direction of the Duchess's eyes.

"Tell me about her," she said softly. "She left cards, and Alec said he used to know her. So I asked her to dine——"

"My dear, she is a little *intrigante*, with a great deal more power than is good for her! She has a way of forcing intimacy upon you sometimes at the point of the bayonet; but that's the defect of her quality. She knows everybody—especially on our side—and there are few things she can't do for a man, if she chooses."

"Do you believe as much in 'back-stairs' as all that?" said Caroline, a little contemptuously.

"I believe in what I see," replied the Duchess, shaking an obstinate head on which a diamond tiara sat, somewhat insecurely, in the midst of fair, greyish coils, too abundant to deceive. "Women have just as much influence as they ever had. And they'll always have it—vote or no vote. The men are no match for them—poor things!"

Caroline rose with a laugh, brought over the Ambassadors to keep the Duchess company, and went herself to explore Mrs. Whitton.

Mrs. Whitton offered her compliments on the house and the pictures. Then Caroline said with a slight shyness, agreeable in one possessing such obvious personal advantages—

"You used to know Alec when he was quite a boy?"

"We met at a Commem—when we were very young and very green. But he hardly looks a day older!"—said Madge Whitton, turning round on her chair and propping her face on both hands, so as to look straight into the dark eyes above her. "He's splendid. I was glad to see you had come home!"

Caroline stiffened. Why should Mrs. Whitton be glad?—what affair was it of hers? The Duchess's remark about "forcing intimacy" recurred to her.

"We had been a long time in Italy. One gets tired of it after a while," she said, rather coldly.

"Oh dear, yes." The tone was careless. "But I was thinking of the party and the country. We want young men—and new blood—so badly! And I remember seeing Mr. Wing just before he went abroad, nearly three years ago—oh, just a few minutes at some party or other—and he talked to me about Parliament, and a seat that somebody had proposed to him. It's



wonderful what people say about his speaking at Oxford. Of course there are lots of clever boys every year who speak at the Union. But he seems to have been so exceptional—so remarkable! And speaking is such a power nowadays! We haven't got enough of it—on our side."

"You take such a great interest in politics?"

Mrs. Whitton laughed.

"Well!—I suppose I'm what an enemy would call a 'political woman.' I'm not ashamed! It seems to me the only game worth playing nowadays. It is such a good game!—and it's getting better. The questions are so big—and the issues so thrilling. Don't you agree? Whether it's only for fun and excitement—or whether it's for what people call their principles—I don't much care. The great thing is to join in. Play it if you can!"

Caroline conquered a certain vague distaste, and, for Alec's sake, began to pick Mrs. Whitton's brains. In a quarter of an hour's conversation she began to discover how much Mrs. Whitton knew of this life and this world, where she herself was a tyro and beginner.

The coming men, and the disappearing men; the quarrels and the rivalries; the motives animating this leader and that; the place hunters and the idealists; the love-affairs and their bearing on the game; the wives who were a help, and the wives who hung like the dead albatross round their husbands' necks:—Mrs. Whitton's talk flowed like a chattering stream among them all. Caroline Wing was presently listening to her spell-bound, her own mind in a ferment.

All the same it was a motley gathering—this, that Lord Wing called "Caroline's first rout." The Duchess watched it with some amusement, occasional satisfac-

tion, more discontent, and repeated resolves to give Caroline good advice. She understood that Alec had done a good deal of indiscriminate inviting, through his clubs, especially the Jockey Club, and through his old cricketing friends who had given him a rousing welcome at Lord's when he showed himself there, at the first match of the season. So that of "smartness" there was no lack, so far at least as men can represent it. There were also a sprinkling of those distant and collateral relations in which any conspicuous family is always rich; and among them people, some dowdily artistic, some ultra-fashionable but needy, who were delighted to leave their cards at Eltham House, and to claim cousinship with the Wings, whatever their sins. All the same, Caroline Wing—receiving at the top of the magnificent staircase—was presently sharply aware that a great many persons who had been invited, had taken no notice whatever of Mrs. Wing's invitation. Especially was this the case, perhaps, among Caroline's own belongings, who were of an academic and University type, she herself having been the daughter of the head of an Oxford College. Some of them had been on very affectionate terms with her as Lady Marsworth; she had gone venturesomely calling among them, and leaving cards of invitation, since her return; and it was with a keen hidden soreness that she realised her rebuff, as the evening wore away.

"A queer lot!" said Lord Wing to the Duchess, as they stood together watching the throng streaming up the stairs. "Caroline, of course, will have to set up an inner circle." Then he turned and looked his sister-in-law in the face. He and she were old and excellent comrades.

"How long do you give them to live it down?" he said, coolly.

The Duchess shook her head.

"They'd better not be too eager about it!"

"No. But it's like furnishing when people are young and poor. You have to begin. You put in a lot of cheap stuff, and then gradually, as circumstances improve, you turn out the rubbish and replace it by something better. Or put it another way. If Alec had married this young woman before she saw Marsworth, they would have the world at their feet. Now, as I've told him, if they want the world, they will have to fight for it. And in these days, the half of fighting is advertising. *This*, I suppose, is advertisement."

He made a movement of his hand towards the crowd.

"Stand back, please!" shouted an excited-looking youth, "Madame Kaminski is going to dance!"

Kaminski danced, and the surrounding crowd held their breaths to watch her. She danced—the marvellous, barbaric creature—beneath the English beauties, the women and children of Romney and Gainsborough on the walls, who seemed to look down upon her, half affrighted at the scene. All the same, before the end, one of their own kind was mingled in the spectacle. For Madame Kaminski suddenly beckoned to the handsome young fellow she had challenged at dinner, and as though hypnotised by her, he obeyed her. He was the eldest son of a Scotch duke, bearing one of the great names of the kingdom. But it was soon evident that in spite of his modesty at dinner, he was no amateur at the business to which he was summoned. The rumour went round that Kaminski had taught him; that they had already performed before small audiences, at one or two great houses. Together, indeed, they turned and twisted, they posed and leapt,

while the Hungarian band accompanied them with a wild or melting music; and when Kaminski at last sank exhausted the frenzy of the spectators matched the passion of the dance.

The Duchess drew a long breath, turned, and walked with tight lips into the next room.

"Abominable!" she said, fiercely to the person beside her, who happened to be Mr. Llewellyn. "That a man of *our* class should do such a thing! What are we coming to?"

"All the same," said Llewellyn, with his quiet smile—"for Mrs. Wing, it has been 'a famous victory.'"

The crowd had melted away, and the outer doors had been shut at last on the last car and taxi. In the central drawing-room, Alec Wing stood with his arm round his wife. His looks were flushed, excited—a little frowning besides.

"You were a marvel!" he said to her, kissing her repeatedly—"and as beautiful as a dream. And the house was wonderful. Oh, it wasn't bad—for a pair of boycotted people! Of course, we'll improve—we'll improve."

And leaving her, he began to walk up and down, ruminating aloud—

"I don't think I liked the dance—it gave me the creeps somehow. Perhaps, we won't ask her again, darling? We'll trust to our own attractions! Now that you've been seen—and the house—that's enough. But I've had some awfully good talks—with several people——"

He turned and looked at her joyously.

"That fellow Llewellyn's no end of a good chap, Carrie! He's promised to put me in the way of several

things. I'm to work at two or three subjects—he'll advise me. And I shall make Father find some money for the party. We're in a bad way, we really are. By George! life is interesting, isn't it! I shall do something in politics, I really believe!"

"Of course you will, darling!" said Carrie, almost impatiently. "I made Mr. Llewellyn confess that the one thing our side wants just now is young men with brains—and money. You'll be a godsend."

She stood leaning against the mantelpiece, her dark hair, caught, as it were, among the roses and carnations of a great Dutch flower-piece, built into the *cheminée* behind her, while the real flowers, banked along the floor, at her feet—roses, red and white—mingled with the folds of her white dress. Nothing could have been more brilliant than her figure, thus flower-circled, or than the proud affection in her eyes.

He drew fresh certainty, fresh ardour from hers.

"I must say that letter from Bothwell was encouraging!" he said, in high good humour. "In the first place, it showed that people hadn't forgotten I could speak. In the next, that my father's view of the part which the 'unco guid' were going to play in our case, darling, was overdone! Of course a great number of people who might have been here to-night didn't come. We shall be cold-shouldered and tabooed, no end, by all the people who take their cue from the Court—that's clear—and that we expected. We shall beat them in the long run! But, it's also clear—as I have always believed—in *politics*—that kind of thing is weakening. And that's all I ask."

He paced up and down before her, running his hand absently through the masses of his fair hair—turning presently to say—

"You know, Carrie, politics are going to be *absorb-*

ing the next few years. The Tories will go back to Protection as soon as ever they see the chance and there'll be a big fight! I've thought of all sorts of jolly things to say in my Hull speech—things that will sound new, anyway, if they aren't new—and things that will go down! And then if I make a success there, the Whips will prick up their ears, and I can begin to press for a seat."

"Of course you can!" said Carrie eagerly. "It is your sort, Alec, that are really wanted in Parliament—the men who will *work*, and throw their whole lives into great questions."

And all the time she devoured him with her tender look, only anxious that he should be happy, that he should find his sphere, that his days should be full and gay.

"And that little woman"—said Alec, pausing in his walk—"that Mrs. Whitton—did you get any talk with her, Carrie? A clever little puss! Very good talk too. She reminded me that she and I flirted one whole evening at a Commem ball nearly ten years ago. She was a babe, just out of short frocks—rather sweet—and rather go-ahead! I believe she let me kiss her!" He laughed out. "Can't you see us! Well, now, she seems to have come on tremendously. She knows all the political people, and she really gave me some useful hints. Now you won't mind, darling, if I go to see her on Sundays, if I lunch with her sometimes? You won't be jealous?"

He held out his hands to her, laughing.

Caroline laughed scornfully in reply, then suddenly changed her note.

"Yes, I shall be jealous!" she said breathlessly. "I'm always jealous when you look at anyone else. But I'll be good, all the same. The Duchess said I

ought to make friends with her—and I did try. But—were you pleased, Alec, to-night?—Did I do my best? Praise me!—I've earned it. Oh, I'm so tired!"

"Go to bed, foolish woman! I must say good night and 'thank you' to the band. They're just off."

He hurried away, and she was left alone. In the farther drawing-rooms the lights were being extinguished by a servant; only some of the pictures were still illuminated. Suddenly, as Caroline turned to look for her husband in the increasing darkness, only one radiant figure remained, which seemed to be actually moving towards her. It was the figure of a child, a boy of four or five years old—bright hair blown back—soft hands outstretched—the sweet mouth open.

A thrill of anguish and horror passed through Caroline. She stood spell-bound—looking. Then at a touch, all was dark, the vision had disappeared.

"It was the Reynolds boy," she said to herself, trembling in every limb—"not like him really—only just something—in the hair—the expression—oh, *darling!—darling!*"

She stood there, her hands on her breast, quieting herself. Then she hurried out of the room and upstairs that Alec might not see the tears in which she was bathed.

## CHAPTER V

THE fame of the Eltham House "entertaining" had soon spread far and wide. London was full of it. The Wings' dinners and receptions were much more discussed than a small crisis in Parliament, just before Whitsuntide, which might have put the Government out, but didn't; or than an episcopal dispute which filled the newspapers. The house, the company, the Kamiński dance, Mrs. Wing's beauty, and Mrs. Wing's jewels—the supposed brazenness of the lady, the lavish generosity of the father-in-law—these topics kept many tongues going. In the more old-fashioned sections of the world of birth and wealth, where everybody is a cousin of everybody else, and more or less acquainted with everybody else's affairs, the older men and women, especially, shook their heads, and, like Lady Theodora, pronounced the whole thing a bad mistake. The Wings could not possibly hope to win their way back into "society," properly understood, by mere extravagance and notoriety; it was just like Lord Wing to aid and abet them in trying to do so; and if the attempt were pushed, some very plain language would have to be used.

Among some of the younger folk, on the other hand, there was a disposition to look with much tolerant amusement on the Wings' great adventure. The wives were not going to call—that was settled; but the husbands were constantly coming across Alec Wing



at one or other of the clubs they frequented, at Lord's, or at the principal race meetings, while Mrs. Wing's box at the Opera, which she had taken off the hands of the old Marchioness of Doncaster for the last half of the season, was rapidly becoming thronged by men, whenever she appeared, and those some of the most courted of their day. It was said that she was decidedly agreeable, with a pleasant down-rightness, and a vehement way of expressing herself when she was moved, which gave a remarkable brilliancy to her beauty. There was no doubt as to the devotion of the two culprits to each other; it was conspicuous, sometimes embarrassing; and—as Madge Whitton was constantly telling people—a real passion, however lawless, is always—in a way—respectable. It began to be said in some quarters that Sir John Marsworth had really been “impossible”; doubts were expressed here and there as to the blacker facts of the story; and eagerness to be, at least, kept well informed of the doings at Eltham House grew with the season. Mrs. Wing, it was presently known, had taken the line of not accepting invitations. She saw the world only at home, and so on her own terms; which showed her cleverness. She had made no attempt to show herself at Ascot; although Wing himself had defiantly braved the enclosure. On Sundays, and at Whitsuntide, she was to be found at a charming house on the river, which Alec Wing had taken furnished till August, expressly for “week ends,” and it was known that political gatherings of interest had taken place there once or twice. Meanwhile, and especially as the season advanced, the great house in Mayfair kept open doors night after night. To judge from the names which got into the newspapers, politicians and diplomatists dined there freely; while the “evenings,” always two a week,

were crowded and the entertainments of the most lavish kind. The best of singing and of acting; all the great names of the Opera and the theatres; with plenty of space also for quiet talk, in the long series of beautiful rooms; plenty of space, too, for some of the best bridge in London. Mrs. Wing did not play, but Alec was an average steady player, high up in the second class, and won or lost with the same good humour.

Meanwhile, amid all this more or less indulgent or laughing comment, there was what gave it all zest—a current of opinion strongly and implacably hostile. The Royalties were as flint, even though Lord Wing had been a rather special favourite with the old Queen, and Alec Wing himself had been the chosen playfellow and comrade of some of the younger princes. Royalty had let it be known that it would not attend the annual dinner of a certain famous club, if Alec Wing claimed his right to be there; and when Wing accidentally—for he had not meant to put himself forward—came face to face with the Royal party, in the Ascot enclosure, they looked through him and round him, to perfection, although a prominent member of the group had been once on particularly friendly terms with Wing, as his fellow officer in the same guards regiment; a regiment, by the way, which had put such pressure, so it was said, on Wing, at the time of the divorce, that he had been practically forced to send in his papers. And there were plenty of private enemies ready to put the dots on the i's, in support of the Court attitude.

In this respect, Lady Theodora was unceasingly busy. One afternoon, at a singularly expensive and correspondingly fashionable fête in aid of some Royal charity, given in the Regent's Park in the last week of June, she felt herself touched on the shoulder, and looking round saw an immensely tall woman, heroic,

indeed, in stature, who could not move without being noticed, and was always more sensitively aware of the fact than anybody gave her credit for. In truth, she managed her height uncommonly well; and those whose notice was first attracted by the masculine stature of the lady, were agreeably surprised by the face accompanying it, a face capable, indeed, of the most stern and repellent expressions, but, as a rule, marked by a quiet serenity, and aloofness, as of one who rather shrank from than challenged the world about her.

Lady Theodora grasped Mrs. Washington's hand with effusion, and they adjourned to a shady corner under the trees, where the noise of the band and the crowd interfered with them but little.

It was from here that the two ladies almost immediately became aware of the passage—one might even say the triumphal progress—of Mrs. Alec Wing across a lawn some few yards away. Her handsome husband was beside her, with half a dozen other young men, and two or three older celebrities, Mr. Llewellyn among them, hovering in the rear. She herself, beneath the shade of her large hat lined with faint rose-colour, stepped like a goddess, charm and youth personified.

Lady Theodora raised an eye-glass and looked fixedly after the departing group.

"Is that the first time you've seen her?" she asked Mrs. Washington, who had quickly withdrawn her eyes.

"Not quite. I have seen her at the Opera—from a distance. A most beautiful creature!—that no one can deny."

"She does not attract me," said Lady Theodora dryly. "But one never knows what men will admire. I hear Mr. Washington thinks her clever."

Mrs. Washington turned a guarded look on her companion.

"He was introduced to her first at the Opera, in April, and has been to see her once or twice since. He is much interested in her conversation. He says she is passionately political."

"So I understand. She seems to be playing every possible card for Alec. And with money and good looks, she will no doubt get what she wants."

Lady Theodora's tone and shrug implied that Mrs. Wing, and the world which accepted her, were about worthy of each other. Mrs. Washington paused a moment and then said—"Mr. Wing seems to be making great effort to push himself politically. I see he has been speaking in one or two small places. But I imagine candidates will soon find out that he does them no good. And they say he wants a seat. But the moral standard in politics has been steadily going up. I am afraid—no, I *hope*"—her grave smile broke out—"that he will find it impossible. It is of course a thousand pities for everybody. For we want candidates, and we want money."

Lady Theodora's look was still ironical.

"Well, of course there's plenty of money!"

Her companion's grey eyes seemed to rouse; and slight ripples of expression began to run over the large and finely cut face, animating and transforming it. Mrs. Washington in her youth and before her marriage had been a welcome speaker in great evangelical gatherings, where she was often spoken of as "inspired."

"I don't know about money," she said, with slight emphasis. "That compromises nobody—unless there are conditions. But our Anglicans and our Dissenters will both see to it that a co-respondent in such a divorce

case is not accepted by us as an official candidate for Parliament ! ”

“All the same, I imagine”—said Lady Theodora, pondering, “that before long, Alec will be in the House of Lords. Wing’s is not at all a good life. And then—suppose he has put the party under obligations—great obligations—by the time we come in—what then?—won’t it be impossible not to admit him?”

““What then?”” repeated Mrs. Washington. She turned sharply towards her companion, and Lady Theodora was slightly startled by her manner. “Well, then—if the men are inclined to give way, there are always—*the women!* What is the Woman’s Movement worth, dear Lady Theodora, if it can’t exclude people like these from our public life?”

Lady Theodora did not kindle. She was not a feminist, in any sense, and had no special belief in her own sex. But she was aware of Mrs. Washington’s opinions, which had to be borne with like all the other distasteful things in life—a cold in the head, or an unsatisfactory balance at the bank—and could not be argued with to any useful purpose. Besides, she was rather puzzled. Some feminists, she was certain, would defend the Wings. So she merely murmured, as her eyes followed the retreating figures—

“There’s no doubt it was a bad story.”

“Could it possibly have been worse?” said Mrs. Washington ardently. “When you think of it! A good man—a man of the highest character, who had always treated his wife most kindly, most affectionately, leaves her alone in Florence, with her two children, while he goes home in a hurry, to see his only brother who is desperately ill—it is supposed, dying. The brother lingers, and the husband—Sir John—can’t leave him. Meanwhile the wife—takes a lover! flaunts it

indeed, in the most shameless way—makes no attempt to conceal it. She goes about with him everywhere, and the poor children are left to a governess and a nurse—well, of course, you know all that's said about that governess! The little boy is very delicate; the doctor doubts if he can live. He gets a chill and fever—is actually in bed with high temperature—when there is a report of the husband's return. Instantly, the wife and the lover go off. Sir John finds his wife gone—his child dying and neglected. And the child does die!—murdered by those two people. To see that young man smiling and talking—at a place like this—makes me shudder. And as for the mother—she seems to me to have blood on her hands!”

A shiver ran through Lady Theodora. She had been saying much the same things herself, to her intimates, for many weeks; but to hear them from Mrs. Washington's mouth made them somehow more terrible, and more convincing, even to herself. For Mrs. Washington was a person round whom a kind of halo floated. The gay world scoffed at her, but for the sake of her husband's great position, had to bear with her. She was known to be passionately religious; a mystic, who carried austerity into daily life. You might think her a canting Pharisee, or you might think her a saint. In any case, she was formidable; and there was no society in which she could be overlooked. She was also a devoted wife, and the mother of three satisfactory sons, now growing up. Her influence over a strong man, soon, if political omens told true, to be England's prime minister, was well-known. It was therefore to be expected that few people should be at once more cordially detested and more whole-heartedly admired than Elizabeth Washington.

After she had delivered her denunciation, Mrs.

Washington sat erect with her hands clasped on her knee, looking straight before her, over the lawns covered with animated groups, white tents, and pretty women in gay trailing dresses. Her lip and nostril quivered; and the little suffering child she spoke of seemed to be present to her mournful look.

Lady Theodora appeared to have nothing left to say. Her eyes turned to search the farther lawn for her girls, and she began to think a little restlessly of tea, when suddenly a recollection struck her—

“Yet you tell me that Mr. Washington admires her—and goes to see her?” she said brusquely, not without a certain tone of remonstrance.

A quick, slight change passed over Mrs. Washington’s countenance. “Men naturally look at such things rather differently from women. And perhaps—it is right they should.”

“Why, I thought you were all for equal standards for men and women!” cried Lady Theodora, astonished.

Mrs. Washington smiled, and coloured a little.

“As far as personal conduct goes, certainly. But I think men may perhaps be allowed to judge more leniently than women. Ah, Dick, there you are!”

She rose with an almost girlish alacrity, her whole face lighting up, as a broad-shouldered man approached them.

Richard Washington nodded affectionately to his wife, and extended a friendly hand to Lady Theodora. He too—like his wife—was of large and imposing physique; though he was stout where she was painfully thin. Except that his hair was a reddish brown, and his colouring fair, he was not unlike the statue of Gambetta which stands eternally haranguing the Place du Carrousel, and the vanished Tuileries. The same open brow, the same aquiline features, the same trick

of gesture. He looked an orator, and was one. It was not so easily intelligible that he had been a successful cotton-spinner for twenty years before he entered Parliament; and yet the very precise and sensitive lines of the delicate mouth, the slight double chin, and the tendency to weight, betrayed the man of sedentary life, accustomed to detail. And it was indeed exactly in the combination of an accurate and methodical mind with—on occasion—an amazing power of thunderous or moving speech, that Washington's hold on his party lay. Other people could make a Budget speech as well; other people could denounce or plead as eloquently; but none but he could do them both—to the same effect, and the same perfection.

He sat down between the two ladies. He had, it seemed, returned only that afternoon from a speaking expedition to the North, and finding the House was up—it being a Friday—had pursued his wife to Regent's Park.

"Has it all gone well, Dick?" asked his wife. The light in her eyes seemed to envelop him.

He pushed his hat to the back of his head.

"Oh, yes," he said, but in rather a tired voice—"fairly. But we want a lot more organisation in the North."

"And candidates," said Lady Theodora.

"And candidates"—he repeated. "We can't get anybody to attack the safe seats—to put up a losing fight. I can't think what's happened to our young men. In my young days, there was always somebody to try a forlorn hope—just for the fun and the kudos of the thing. And now it's all caution and calculation. If they fight, at least they must have all their expenses found. And we simply haven't got the money."

As he spoke, two persons—a lady and gentleman—



detached themselves from the moving crowd, and began to walk towards the exit from the Park. The lady on the left bowed smiling to Mr. Washington, who raised his hat, as did the lady's companion.

Lady Theodora and Mrs. Washington sat motionless.

"Wing, I suppose, is no use?" said Lady Theodora grimly, looking after the retreating pair, whom she had recognised as Lord Wing and his daughter-in-law.

Mr. Washington made circles on the ground with the point of his stick.

"I suppose Lord Wing is immensely rich?" he said pleasantly, looking up. Lady Theodora's irritable gesture, in answer, implied that the mere thought of so much undeserved wealth was hard to bear.

"He made one fortune in South Africa, and another in the Argentines, and a great deal in rubber. Then there are the estates and the mines, and the London property. I turn Socialist when I think of Wing's possessions! And nobody can get anything out of him. I've tried for my charities till I am tired. But as for the party funds, he could finance a whole general election to-morrow if he pleased!"

"Mrs. Wing must persuade him!" said Washington, smiling and dropping his eyes again to the ground.

Lady Theodora turned upon him rather suddenly.

"Well, you'd better persuade *her*!" she said bluntly. She and Richard Washington were very old acquaintances, and, partly from lack of imagination, she was not afraid of him.

"Ah—so you've heard of my visits?" He looked round to smile at her, not without mischief. "I found an extremely interesting party there last Sunday afternoon; and I dined there last week. She seems to be making her way."

"No doubt." Lady Theodora threw back her head,

—adding slowly, after a moment—“‘In the morning it is green and groweth up.’”

Washington shrugged his shoulders, and in a musing tone, continued the quotation—

“‘In the evening it is cut down, dried up, and withered.’ Withered!—Such a face!—Difficult to conceive it!” Then, addressing his wife, “My dear, let’s get some tea, and go home.”

They said good-bye to Lady Theodora, who on her side went to look for her daughters in the throng. The Washingtons moved towards the tea tent and were soon waylaid and surrounded. The speech that Washington had made the night before at Sheffield was in all the papers, reported verbatim, and commented upon in every tone of alarm or satisfaction. From the eager looks of those who came up to congratulate him, in this crowd of Londoners, and the sour looks of those more numerous persons who avoided him, it could be gathered that the speech had been a sensation, and had carried him a long step farther in a remarkable career.

Alec Wing, who was getting an ice for Mrs. Whitton, turned to meet the great man, as soon as he perceived the conspicuous lion head. He came beaming, with outstretched hand.

“Magnificent! Congratulate you, sir! You have given the whole party a lift.”

The touch of old-fashioned deference, implied in the “Sir,” on the lips of this golden youth, was not at all disagreeable to the democratic leader. He smiled on the speaker.

“Glad you were satisfied. It was a splendid meeting—a good omen for Hull. I think now we ought to win Hull—but it will be a close fight!”

“I’m sure we shall win!—after the lead you’ve given. Bothwell’s awfully confident. He’s roped me

in! I'm going down to speak for him—the eve of the poll.”

Washington's look rested a moment, attentively, on the young man.

“Are you? Well, we hope for good news!”

The leader of the Opposition passed on. Alec Wing perceived that Mr. Washington was followed by his wife, whose great height and striking spiritual face were already well-known to him. Washington had not introduced him, and the stately woman, whose flowing dress of plain grey satin and white veil thrown back from a coif-like head-covering distinguished her from the fashion plates around her, had evidently no intention of looking his way. Wing felt half angry, half scornful, as she passed him by.

“Bigot!” he thought. “Doesn't she look it? But she'll have to call on Carrie before long, all the same!”

He left the Park with Durrant, and, as they neared the gate, they perceived Washington and the chief Opposition Whip, pacing a secluded lawn with their hands behind them, deep in talk.

“Hull—I'll bet!” said Wing, with a laugh, indicating the distant pair. “The speech last night of course was entirely aimed at Hull. All the local people and our Central Office have been working like horses. Jim, my boy, if we win Hull, you may pack up, for your blessed Government will be out in a month! Come down, and hear me speak!”

“Not I! I couldn't keep my temper.”

“What do you mean, you old Tory?”

“I can't stand hearing a man who lives in Eltham House talk socialistic bosh; you can't mean it, and you don't!”

Wing burst into a fit of laughter.

“I mean it, as much as anybody else does. How

much do you mean it, when you talk big about your blessed Empire?"

"Every word," said Durrant stoutly.

"Not you. I play 'the people'; you play 'the Empire.' One stalking horse is as good as the other. But it's a jolly good game all the same."

"Bye-bye!" said Durrant, as he disappeared into the doorway of Baker Street Station.

Alec walked on, southward and westward, till he found himself crossing Piccadilly, and at the top of St. James's Street. On his way down the street, he chanced to meet an unusual number of acquaintances—men—with whom he exchanged greetings. A more keenly sensitive person would perhaps have noticed, long before this, the change which had taken place in the quality of these greetings, as compared with the days before that hastily arranged visit to Florence which had decided his life. They seemed friendly enough; but there was nevertheless a subtle loss in them—a loss of what the French call "consideration." When his London life had first begun, he was the young Adonis, envied and admired by troops of friends, with some University successes behind him, and apparently a boundless future before him, what with his father's wealth, his own popularity, and the political traditions of his family. He was still young and rich, and he was abler and better informed, by far, than he had been three years before; the husband, moreover, of one of the most beautiful women in London. And yet there was a difference—a kind of queer descent in the temperature of life. And in spite of bravado, it was beginning to tell upon him now much more strongly than on his first reappearance in London. Some recent occurrences had annoyed him. One or two fellows—old friends—who had engaged him to speak

in their constituencies, had lately put him off, for reasons not particularly convincing. He hated shufflers! If they didn't want him, why couldn't they say so? Well, anyway he would have his chance at Hull. He began to think of his speech—confident that it would make a mark, and envisaging already the crowded hall, and the applause.

He had nearly reached the Palace, when he became aware of a tall, sallow-faced man with iron-grey hair and moustache mounting the street towards him. For a few seconds he was conscious of a violent shock, an impulse of flight. He would have hastily crossed the street, but that long lines of closely jammed traffic made it impossible. No friendly shop or club presented itself. He walked desperately on. What lies people had been telling! This man in his path was supposed to be living in connection with a Jesuit mission house, somewhere in the Highlands.

The two men passed. As they met, there was a momentary pause, then a sudden recognition—a flash—in the eyes of the elder. Alec Wing passed on, partly relieved. Not John!—no, not John—but Henry Marsworth, the brother to whom John was devoted, whom he so closely resembled, whom he had rushed home to nurse, leaving his wife in Florence. Quickly, an annoying thought occurred. Henry Marsworth was a shipowner, with an estate somewhere in the East Riding, within twenty miles of Hull. An active politician too, on the Conservative side.

He hurried on, disturbed, and angry with himself for a lack of forethought, towards the great political club in Pall Mall whither he was bound. He found it full of talk and bustle. One of those waves of unreason to which the business of politics is always exposed was running high in the Radical party. The caution of men

like Llewellyn was for the moment out of fashion. The Tory Government were going to lose Hull; they had done badly in the House of Commons that week; a few weeks, three months at most, must see an election. How to force them to it!—How to get them out!

Alec wandered from group to group of eager and smoke-wreathed talkers, hearing always the same wail—*Funds!* It had lately come out through various odd channels, that the party funds had been seriously mismanaged by those appointed to look after them. There had been some unlucky investments, and a great deal of carelessness. The other side, on the contrary, was reported to be exceedingly well provided. One of the party millionaires had recently ratted to the Government side; in hopes, no doubt, said the bitter gossips on the club hearthrug, of a more speedy peerage from the Tories. “The rest of our rich men are sitting on their money-bags—and much good may it do them!” cried a fierce young M.P., haranguing a circle of elder men, who kept their own counsel.

Wing listened a while, then slipped away, jumped into a taxi, and drove to Claridge’s Hotel, in search of his father. On the way, he bestowed more thought upon his father’s character and idiosyncrasies than he had ever done in his life. Was it at all likely that Lord Wing would be greatly moved by the party necessities? That he could do anything he pleased, if he pleased, Alec was tolerably certain, “though we’ve been costing him a pretty penny!” But would he please? He could be lavishly and absurdly generous; he could also higggle stubbornly over a sixpence, and refuse the most reasonable claims. “But, by George, it might mean something for me, if he did come down!” The young man’s thoughts wandered to contingencies ahead. There was a promising seat in the Midlands on which

he was beginning to set his heart. The holder of it was an old man, who had recently been very ill, and Wing had it from one of the junior Whips of the party that the seat would probably soon be vacant. But it would be hopeless for any one to put up except as the official candidate, supported by the Whips. As for his father's counsels of delay, he thought of them with more and more impatience. The political atmosphere was already hot with battle. He himself had been haunting the House of Commons, throwing himself into party questions and really working hard at two or three of them, under Llewellyn's friendly advice. Why hesitate and shilly-shally? It was absurd in these days of free action and free opinion that a man with his gifts and resources should let himself be deterred by the fear of Puritanical opposition. He and Carrie were married. What had anybody to do with their private history? If he stood and won, it would be not only a victory for the party, it would be a victory for the personal liberty of the individual over the eternal Tartuffe.

Many motives were at work in him. He was conscious of considerable abilities never yet adequately used. His wild passion for Carrie Marsworth had swept him out of all the recognised paths and chances. But he must and would lay hold on them again. There was an unspoken feeling, hardly shaped even to himself, that other people might suffer permanently for such a thing as he had done, but not he—not a man with such extraordinary advantages as he. Of course people had been cruelly down on him just for that very reason—his advantages! There was that canting judge—and a lot of newspaper fellows—and his brother officers who had treated him abominably—and others. But it couldn't last—let him "ram ahead," and it would come right.

He felt within him a violent egotistic will which would not let him rest; which could not stand even the postponement of what he desired. But at the same time nobler feelings entered in—honourable ambition, and the strong desire to shine in the ways his forefathers had trod; the personal zest of one who had been brought up from childhood on intimate terms with the men and the causes involved in English political life; the longing for something to do, and for an object in life; together, no doubt, with the unconfessed and creditable hope that by the vigorous and disinterested service of his country he might before long wipe out the recollection of his fault, and appease his judges:—all these feelings and facts were elements in the young man's impetuous resolve.

Then, as he drove along, full of eager scheming, he found himself haunted against his will by the look on Henry Marsworth's face. Courted and flattered as Wing had always been, the stern contempt in that passing look disturbed not only his self-love, but his natural and—hitherto—amiable wish to stand well with everybody. The love-dream on the Tuscan hills had been so perfect, so intoxicating, so sheltered from all things jarring and hostile! And here—in this London street—those eyes—with their unspoken word—“*Adulterer!*” Wing's cheeks burnt, while his mind quickly and angrily recoiled upon the arguments that had satisfied his conscience under the stress of passion, two years before.

He was still defending himself to himself, when the taxi stopped at Claridge's. Lord Wing was in the hotel, though about to leave that evening for Scotland. In a mood of mingled eagerness and trepidation, Alec took the lift up to his father's rooms.



## CHAPTER VI

OH, Alec!—how late you are!”  
“Are there some people coming to dinner?” said Wing impatiently. “Bother! I had quite forgotten.”

“Mr. Llewellyn—and that Treasury man you told me to ask. Oh, and Alec!—my little cousin, Joyce Allen, will be there. She came this afternoon for a few days—just to be looked at—and I couldn’t leave her out. I hope you won’t mind.”

Caroline was in the hands of her maid, dressing for dinner. The eyes she turned upon her husband, as he stood in the open doorway of his dressing-room, shone out from the cloud of dark hair that fell about her neck and shoulders. Such beauty as hers is at its best in disarray. But Wing, almost for the first time, did not notice it. She saw indeed that he looked preoccupied and excited.

“Well, I hope they won’t stay late. I’ve got lots to talk to you about.”

She smiled at him.

“Important? Well, go and dress. And I’ll get rid of them as soon as I can.”

When Alec followed his wife down to the yellow drawing-room, he found—as he had been warned—a slim creature in black standing shyly beside Carrie. She was introduced to him as “Joyce.” He vaguely remembered that Caroline had spoken to him some weeks before of a death she had noticed in the *Times*—

that of a favourite first cousin of her mother's, a clergyman in Yorkshire. "He was a widower, with one girl"—she had said, musing—"I haven't seen them—or heard of them—for years. But they were very poor. I expect she is left without a penny. She used to be a dear little thing. I wonder if I could get hold of her? I dreadfully want somebody to help me, Alec, in this big house! There's so much to do!"

Whereby Alec had understood that Carrie wanted a secretary, after the manner of other great ladies, and that it would give her pleasure, were it possible to fill the post with this—presumably—forlorn cousin. He knew very well that Carrie's pride and feelings had suffered sorely, though silently, under the complete severance between her and those relations of her own for whom she cared most. He was well aware, too, of yearnings in his wife's heart which neither passion nor society were likely to extinguish. Possibly the sheltering and mothering of this orphan girl, supposing the girl turned out to be suitable, might do something to soothe them. He hastily gave his blessing on the scheme, taking for granted, of course, that Carrie would not let the new-comer interfere with their life *à deux*; and then thought no more about it.

But now here was the young lady—a girl, apparently about twenty, in the very simplest of black frocks, her hair coiled in large plaits at the back of her head, and a narrow black ribbon carrying a locket round her neck. "Not pretty," he thought, after a first cursory examination—"but might be worse." She had given him her hand with quiet self-possession, and as there was no other lady in the party, he found himself presently taking her down to dinner, not without some bored wonder on his own part as to how much attention Carrie might expect him to give this little person.

The little person herself did not seem to expect any attention. She sat quietly beside him, answering when he spoke to her, without awkwardness or hesitation, though always, as he could not help noticing, with a slight rush of colour to the pale cheeks. Six weeks, was it, since she had lost her father? His easy good-nature made him sorry for her, and he could not help speculating inwardly with some boyish amusement as to what the young woman, fresh from her country parsonage, must be thinking of Eltham House. Sometimes, whenever the conversation flagged at all, he caught the girl's brown eyes travelling round the room, taking in apparently the great Vandyck, the series of family portraits, the tapestries, and the superb silver—Renaissance flagons, bowls, and salvers—ranged on the carved buffet which faced the Vandyck. They were intelligent eyes, he thought; certainly not the eyes of a fool.

But the conversation did not often flag. Llewellyn led it, and in a small gathering, where he felt himself at ease, there was no better talker. Jim Durrant had dropped in, and besides the Treasury man, one Axeham, whose brain was the unfailing resource of each successive Chancellor of the Exchequer, there was a young Lord Melton whom Alec had himself invited the day before, and then forgotten. He was the heir of a great Midland magnate; a little foppish perhaps, in a grave way, with his drooping moustache, and pointed black beard, trimmed like a Valois portrait, but able and sympathetic, especially to women. That he was simply dazzled by Carrie was clear; and Alec's vanity as a lover laughed inwardly, well pleased. For he remembered that Melton, who had been his latest fag at Eton, had hesitated—visibly—before accepting his invitation.

The talk fell on Germany, and that possible

Armageddon of the future, of which the world in general thought then so little, and the men closely in touch with European affairs so much. Llewellyn, who spent part of every year in Germany and spoke as a German-lover, gave a graphic account of anti-English feeling in the northern towns.

"We stub their toes wherever they turn. The feeling is absurd—mad—but horribly dangerous."

Axeham cheerily pooh-poohed him. "Germany at war would be bankrupt in a year—and the Kaiser knows it." Durrant, for his part, only hoped he might live to see the struggle that every English soldier was thirsty for. "But you Liberal fellows, if you come in, will never fight! Your tail won't let you—and England will take a back seat for good. Ah well, if you funk it, some of us can always shoot you!"

"Pour encourageur les autres!" laughed Llewellyn. But in the eye that met Durrant's there was a gentle mockery, as of one who kept his own counsel.

"My cousin has just come back from Germany," said Caroline, bending kindly towards the girl. "Haven't you, Joyce?"

Miss Allen coloured again, evidently from shyness. But she answered readily. She had been teaching, she said, in the family of a German officer of high rank. She mentioned the name, and Llewellyn bent across the table with an exclamation. "One of the very best of their military historians," he said, "and one of the most fiercely anti-English."

A sad expression darkened the young face. "Yes, they hate us," she said simply, adding immediately—"but they were very kind to me."

Durrant, who was sitting next her, looked at her with sympathy. "Well, no wonder!" he thought. "with such a nice little creature!"

And he began to draw her out. Her account of her German experiences amused and pleased everybody. Caroline made a little signal to Alec, as much as to say—"Isn't she rather a dear?"—and Wing signalled graciously in return. But as soon as her short innings was over she relapsed into a bright-eyed silence, following all the talk with evident though suppressed eagerness. Durrant liked her increasingly as time went on, little as she allowed him to get out of her. But he gathered presently that she was a cousin of Mrs. Wing's, and this was the first time she had been inside Eltham House. He could not help wondering what she knew about her cousin's story.

Meanwhile for other persons at the table, the dinner, when over, remained in memory as simply Caroline Wing's opportunity. Alec Wing indeed had observed and listened to his wife with some secret amazement. How awfully clever Carrie was getting! She was quite able to hold her own with Llewellyn, who was clearly becoming devoted to her; and as for Melton, she had just knocked him over. In their long love-making in that upland of Vignale, she had been the most delightful of companions, ready to listen or talk, to read or be read to, to draw—embroider—idle—just as he, Alec, pleased. But intellectually he had been the guide, and she the happy follower. Her life with Marsworth had been an isolated and cloistered thing. Living all the year round in a remote Yorkshire dale, with a man of austere religious belief, a stifled intellect and a morbid conscience, she had seen little or nothing of the world and its affairs. Wing had taught her a good deal, had delighted in teaching her, and in watching the quick response that roused at once his pride and his passion.

But now—Carrie had really "come on" astonishingly! And he recalled a dinner of the week before

—Washington's persistent vigil at Carrie's side, at dinner and afterwards; the great man's evident absorption in his hostess, and submission to the spell by which she made a reticent man talk, and talk his best—to his own pleasure, and that of a delighted circle. Washington, no doubt, would soon be one of Carrie's *habitués*.

And yet—what good was it going to do *him*—after all? The young man's self-conceit was taking alarm. He could not help seeing that Llewellyn, whose approval and friendship he himself ardently desired, was much more ready to listen to her than to himself; that Axeham was genially communicative to Carrie, while inclined to hold his host at bay, and that Melton too showed the same kind of discrimination. Of course men, first-rate men, were always deferential to women, and women were taken in by it. A certain discomfort of the male, obscurely threatened in his natural rôle of superiority, swept across him occasionally as he watched his wife. But it was very vague and fugitive; quite effaced in the end by a reflux of pride in her charm and her good looks.

After the general conversation of the dinner-table, the evening passed in a series of duologues—Caroline and Lord Melton in one corner of the yellow drawing-room, Durrant, with the little cousin in tow, walking about among the pictures, Alec, Llewellyn, and Axeham discussing the Parliamentary situation. Alec, however, grew very soon impatient to see the last of his guests, and he was presently reduced to strolling morosely through the pictures by himself, occasionally appealed to by Durrant and Miss Allen, as he happened to come across them.

That little girl must be sent to bed! Caroline must really see to it that she did not become a nuisance. And as to that fellow Melton, would he never go? A

philandering chatterbox! He would give Carrie a hint not to encourage him.

He was fairly on edge by the time Llewellyn and the rest rose to take their departure; so much so that Durrant remarked upon it to Llewellyn, as they walked away together. "What was wrong with Alec? He seemed to have something on his mind?"

"It's true, I understand, about that dinner and H.M.," said Llewellyn cautiously.

Durrant shrugged his shoulders.

"But of course it's true! What else did Alec expect? Why can't he make up his mind to take his snubs like a man! He's got Carrie, and Eltham House, and pots of money. Did he think everybody was going to shake hands and make it up, besides?"

Meanwhile Alec, on turning back again from the outer hall where he had taken leave of his guests, to rejoin Carrie upstairs, perceived a letter lying on the hall table. It was addressed to him, and he opened it eagerly. The hot colour rushed to his temples; he crushed it violently in his hand, and mounted the stairs in moody thought.

At the top of the stairs a little figure in black crossed his path. "Good night, Mr. Wing," said a shy voice.

"Oh, good night," he said, with a sudden effort at courtesy, holding out a perfunctory hand. The figure disappeared along the eastern corridor. "That's a blessing!"—he thought. "I wonder if I can stand her always about?"

He found Carrie in her sitting-room, opening the letters of the evening. She had exchanged her evening dress for something soft and flowing, and her radiant looks showed not a trace of fatigue.

"Wasn't it a pleasant evening, Alec?" she said,

joyously as he entered, holding out her hands to him. Then, arrested by his expression, she changed her tone—

“Darling!—is there anything wrong?”

He threw himself into a chair beside her, made a movement to give her the letter in his hand, thought better of it and put it in his pocket.

“They won’t have me at Hull,” he said, trying to laugh off the blow. “Never mind. We’ll be even with them yet—hypocrites!”

“Won’t have you at Hull?” she repeated. “You don’t mean——”

“I do mean it, I mean just that. I don’t suit their Puritanical taste.”

The colour died out of Caroline’s cheeks, and then returned upon them with a rush.

“What have they to do with our private affairs!” she said passionately.

“Bothwell writes a very decent letter,” said Wing, after a pause. “He says the newspapers on the other side have got hold of the divorce reports—and are threatening to republish them—with the judge’s remarks, etc.—if they bring me down; so he just begs me not to come—‘very sorry’ of course—and that’s all!”

Caroline was silent a moment—then broke out bitterly—

“It’s perfectly intolerable there should be this persecution! Why can’t they let us alone!”

Wing sprang up, and began to pace the room with his hands in his pockets.

“Well, we’ve got to make up our minds, Carrie, what we’re going to do! Am I to knuckle under—give up all thought of politics—take to farming—or aeroplaning—anything you like—or are we going to



stick to it, through thick and thin? If there is a general election this autumn—and they're all talking of it at the clubs—am I to stand or not? Will the Whigs give me a chance, or won't they? Is there any way of inducing them to give me a chance?" Then his tone changed—"Look here!—I've got something very interesting to tell you."

She looked up. He described the scene at the "Forwards" Club and the despairing cry for funds. "Then I went on to see Pater at Claridge's—just caught him. Well, of course he's all for delay—I'm not. I don't believe time will make any difference whatever, unless we choose to wait till you and I, darling, are both old dodderers! And he doesn't believe in an election; and on the whole I do—some time in the autumn. But he's a brick all the same. Practically, I may have whatever money I please, to use as I please—a cool hundred thousand if necessary. He knows everything about the straits the party are in; and he's ready to back me to the last. But, of course, he won't pay till he knows whether the goods will be delivered!"

"Which means"—Carrie had dropped her voice, and was looking at him with wide anxious eyes—"till you know whether they'll give you a seat or not. You are to *buy* your seat?"

"Well, darling!—and doesn't a man buy his baronetcy or his peerage? What's the difference? All I buy is the chance of getting a few thousand duffers to elect me."

"Oh, Alec, it's *dangerous!*" she said, after a moment, in a tone that trembled.

Wing looked at her, half amused, half irritated.

"You needn't look so scared, Carrie! If it did come off, it wouldn't be exactly published in the newspapers.

It would be known to about three people besides you and me—the Opposition Whips—and Pater.”

“That doesn’t make it any better—not a bit better!” she said, earnestly. “Don’t do it, Alec, don’t!”

He could not understand her distress, and began to be angered by it.

“Don’t do what? Anybody may offer money to the party. And as for my part in it, it’s a mere incident of war,” he said, bitterly. “You and I are at war, Carrie—with a lot of people who want to humiliate and punish us. We must just understand that. Pater understands it perfectly! If I’m ever to recover my place and my opportunity, we must play every card we’ve got. And it is absurd not to recognise that money is perhaps our biggest card—money—and Carrie!”

He came to stand behind her, and dropped a light kiss on her hair.

She sat irresponsive, her face in shadow, her hands on her knee.

“How will you ever do it?” she asked, after a pause. “How does one do such a thing?”

“Perfectly simple! I write to our Whips to say I want a seat for the General Election, and such and such a seat would suit me. Will they adopt me as an official candidate and recommend me to the local people? At the same time, by the same post perhaps, Pater writes to them to ask confidentially about the party funds—says that I have been advising him to contribute a substantial sum—something of that kind! Easiest thing possible! Well, then they have to make up their minds. Will they risk it?—or will they refuse what will fill their war chest?”

“Alec dear!—won’t you wait a little—after all?” she said, suddenly holding up her arms to him—and

drawing his face down to hers. "I don't—I don't believe you could keep such a thing—such a—a bargain—from Mr. Washington. And, Alec, you *can't* buy people like Mr. Washington—and Mr. Llewellyn. If they think it would damage the party to help you to a seat, they won't do it—whatever you offer them! And you would be so disappointed if they refused—and I should be so miserable!"

He drew himself away.

"My dear, what's the good of being as beautiful as you are, if you can't influence a man like Washington? All the world knows that he can't say 'No' to a pretty woman."

He came round her chair to stand in front of her, flushed and laughing, his hands on his sides.

"If I were to ask Mr. Washington to do something he thought dishonourable he'd never look at me or speak to me again or Mr. Llewellyn either," she said, with vehemence. "Oh, do understand, dear Alec! Don't trust to money! Trust to making friends. There are many kind people who will give us a chance—there are indeed—when they've had time to forget—what we did."

He looked at her, fairly amazed.

"Don't trust to money"! Why I thought you understood Pater's plan, and agreed with it, Carrie! What on earth are we here for—in Eltham House—if we're not going to use all possible weapons against this British Philistinism and cant? If not, better go and live in a cottage on twopence a year! We're here, I repeat it, to bluff it—to see if we can't force the position—fight the Pharisees—and beat them! And I thought you agreed, Carrie—you *did* agree!" he repeated.

"I know—I'll do anything I can!" she said, pleadingly. "But you see, Alec, since that evening we came

home, I've got to know some of these men—in these three months. They've been awfully good to me. Take Mr. Washington, for instance. I can't tell you what I feel about him. He's such a real great man—and so—so kind and true. I should hate to offend him—to set him against us. And Mr. Llewellyn! What does he care about our being rich?—not a pin!—it makes not the smallest difference to him. But I think he's really—well—sorry for us”—her voice faltered a little—strangely.

“*Sorry for us!*” repeated Alec in wrathful astonishment. “What on earth do you mean, Carrie? What is there to pity, I should like to know? You and I love each other, and we've had a jolly good time. We mean to go on having a jolly good time, don't we? Let him keep his pity to himself!”

“Perhaps he envies us too—for our love!” she said, steadily. “I know he does. I see that in him. But all the same he knows very well that we've set the world against us, and that”—she turned away, and her voice grew muffled—“I've lost Carina—and—— Let's go gently, darling! We're not very old, are we? And we go on making friends all the time.”

“And much good it does us! Look at that letter!” he pointed to it as it lay on her lap. “Didn't you have that man here?—didn't we both make ourselves as pleasant to him as we could?—didn't I offer to help him with his election expenses?—and what was the use of it all! He thinks just as we do about that ass, the British public! But when the pinch comes, he shirks. Hard facts, Carrie!—that's what we've got to face. And it may sound gross—but the only way to beat them is by hard cash!”

The two young creatures, faced each other, divided for the first time in the history of their passion by a

real conflict of feeling. In him the arrogance, the excited will, the fundamental stupidity of a spoilt darling of fortune, accustomed to make the world give way, and infuriated by any real or prolonged resistance. The same excited will had prevailed, when, finding the beautiful woman with whom he had fallen desperately in love alone and undefended in Florence, he had laid violent siege to her, and had finally carried her off from her husband and children in triumph. And now it was incredible to him that he should not be able by similar methods—as violent and as determined—to force his way back into the old position of vantage he had thrown away.

While in Carrie, on the other hand, this renewed contact with English life had brought back upon her all the force of old traditions—the traditions of *conduct*, honourable, law-abiding, self-controlled, which had surrounded her childhood and youth, within grey college walls. Her personal defiance, in truth, had spent itself. For Alec's sake she was ready to brave and attempt most things. But new compunctions, new perceptions, were busy in her. She was scarcely conscious of them. But she was aware at least of a sighing wish to recover her position with men of high character—good men whom she must needs respect—like Mr. Llewellyn, and Richard Washington—who had treated her gently and respectfully, when good women had renounced her. She had begun to foresee—vaguely—a long process of reconciliation, long, and delicate, and ultimately successful. A vain dream, perhaps; for it involved making the best of two wholly incompatible worlds. But it had comforted her conscience. And now here was Alec spoiling everything! For it seemed to her she already knew the men he had to deal with better than he did.

She rose, and put her arms gently round his neck. "Alec!—can't you do it in other ways! Even if the people at head-quarters—here in London—agreed, how could they answer for the local people? It would be Hull over again. Be patient, dearest! When I hear you and Mr. Llewellyn talking, I feel so sure you'll do splendid things some day! Why don't you take up the housing on the estates? There's lots wants doing. Mr. Llewellyn suggested it to me. Pater would give you all the money you want. You might lead the way for England. And then they couldn't keep you out!"

His face darkened. He took her hands in his and drew them down.

"My dear Carrie!—if I don't get into Parliament *soon*, I shall never get into office, and for an ambitious man—and I *am* ambitious—I have set my heart on politics since I was in knickerbockers—what are politics without office? It will take me longer now than other people to get to the front—and I want my *chance*!"

And almost throwing her hands from him in the passion of his mood, he began to pace the room in front of her. She followed him, pleading—

"Alec, dear Alec!—let us make friends!—not try to bribe. You know how angry people have been lately about buying honours—peerages and decorations! Wouldn't there be an outcry, if it were ever known or suspected that your father had paid £100,000 to make the Whips adopt you? Wouldn't it be called all sorts of horrid names?"

"It wouldn't be *known*!" he said frowning. "These things are generally in the hands of one man. Trust my father to manage it."

"But it might so easily get out," she said, breathlessly. "And how can it be kept from Mr. Washington

—or Mr. Llewellyn? Alec, they'll *never* risk the party for £100,000!"

He was silent for a moment, and then said, looking at her rather darkly—

"And when I do try to make friends, you are jealous directly!"

She wavered a moment, as though she had been struck. He had never yet spoken to her in that tone, and with that look. Then she flushed crimson, and turned away.

"I don't mean friends like *that*!"

"Like what?"

"I am certain that woman is flirting with you!" she said proudly. "I see it in her whole manner to you. She is trying to lead you on—to make a conquest of you! Else why should she ask you perpetually?—and why should you go to her, Alec? You have lunched with her three times in ten days—and paid calls in the afternoon besides. And at the fête yesterday she simply made a slave of you! People will talk, I tell you, if it goes on!"

Ah!—she was the jealous woman now; no longer the prudent and diplomatic adviser. Her breath came fast. The elemental feeling which had swept them together broke through, undoing for the moment all the recovered instincts and habits. He looked at her in amazement; indignant, yet half appeased.

"Carrie—you *are* a goose! Why, I asked you beforehand if I might go and see Mrs. Whitton—if I might accept her invitation, without you; and you promised—you *promised*—not to be jealous. Every time she has asked me, it has been to meet somebody political. You might have heard everything! Well, upon my word, if this is the way you are going to treat me, when I do try to follow your advice, and 'make

friends'—I don't see how you can expect me to pay much attention to you!"

She saw at once that she had made a bad mistake, and that he triumphed over her. But her outburst had been beyond her control. It was the result, unforeseen by her as by him, of a hundred creeping fears, small wounds, accumulating hurts. She had promised, and she had meant to keep her promise. But in these three months, had she already become conscious of the truth of Lord Wing's warning that she had most to fear from her own sex?—from the women who would be only too ready to welcome Alec back to their society, while they ostracised herself? She had begun to feel herself obscurely threatened—in her passion, her possession—from many quarters; to be conscious of enemies in the dark whom she could not see. Hence this conflict in her between old and new; between the reviving instincts of prudence and high thinking, and the instincts of passion.

He pursued his advantage at once.

"And if it comes to that"—he said, half smiling, and yet bitter, "I don't think you need talk, Carrie! Anyone could see that that fellow Melton to-night was making love to you!"

"*Alec!*—when I was thinking of you the whole time I was talking to him! I was pumping him—trying to get to know things—simply for your sake—for nothing else in the world! Well, that is hard!" She fell into her chair, hiding her face in her hands, her pride struggling with her tears. He stood over her half ashamed, yet full of a vague irritation, which was another kind of jealousy from hers, and yet was jealousy.

"I didn't mean it, Carrie—of course, I didn't. Don't cry. I'm a brute. But look here!—I can't



only succeed through you!—you can't expect a man to accept that position—you really can't. I must stand on my own feet, and fight my own fight, however you help me. Of course *you* get on with men like Robert Llewellyn, and Washington. You're a pretty woman!—they want to please you. But it doesn't follow that I shall get anything out of them, for your *beaux yeux*, Carrie! What I feel the whole time is that they accept you, and draw the line at me!"

She lifted a pale face.

"Alec, just have patience—till next year! There won't be an election!"

"There probably will," he said steadily. "And there's a seat in Staffordshire I want."

"Just a few weeks, Alec!—because I ask you!"

"I should lose my chance," he said doggedly.

She rose, despairing, and so wounded, so annoyed that he should have been able to deny her, that she could not—or would not—speak another word.

She gathered up a book, and some letters and moved towards the door. He stood looking at her in silence. Both were conscious that something new and sad had happened to them—not beyond repairing, oh no!—not really touching their love—but still pointing forward to a new scene, a new chapter, in their history. She opened the door, looked back at him, her dark eyes one mute and splendid reproach—and disappeared.

She hurried along the corridor, holding down her pain. The house was dark, and heavy with the scent of flowers; a few shaded lights here and there, which burnt through the night. In the gallery running round the central staircase, a window had been left open on the garden side. It was long past midnight and all was still. A windy moonlight was on the grass; the plane trees tossed and sighed. And round the dim oasis

of the garden ran the night-murmur of London, like a receding voice. Caroline stopped a moment to breathe in the freshness of the wind that was stirring the curtains. The house seemed to be stifling; and for a moment, she hated it. Then in the garden wing, at the end of which lay her own rooms, she perceived a light in another open window.

Joyce! so late?

She went on, filled with a slight sudden remorse that she had thought so little of the girl since dinner. While she was still talking to a servant about some letters for the midnight post, Joyce had said a quiet "good night" and disappeared. But the quick sympathy in Caroline protested that on this first night in the great strange house, it would have been kind to show the new-comer to her room, to exchange a few cousinly words with her before sleep.

Some yearning instinct born obscurely of her own distress made her pause outside the door of the room which bore the name "Miss Joyce Allen"—and then knock softly.

"Come in!" said a surprised voice.

Caroline entered.

She saw a little figure in the plainest of cotton wrappers rise from a chair by a writing-table standing near the open window.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Joyce, in confusion—"I didn't know it was so late!"

"I thought perhaps you couldn't sleep," said Caroline, uncertainly. "You must excuse my coming in. Have you all you want?"

And involuntarily her eyes perceived the girl's preparation for the night; the photographs put out beside the bed, one of the chancel of a church, filled with Easter flowers, the other of a grey-haired man;

the worn Testament, and two or three other little pious books; the neatly folded clothes. She seemed to see her own maiden room in her father's house.

"I was writing to a friend—a very great friend"—said Joyce shyly. "She was married last year—but we always write to each other."

"You ought to be in bed," said Caroline, putting an arm round the thin shoulder. "You look very tired!"

"Oh, no, I'm not tired. It was all so interesting—so beautiful to-night. It's you that look tired." The tone was shy, but the speaker took Caroline's hand in hers.

Something in the voice soothed Caroline wonderfully. She kissed her little cousin affectionately, made her promise to go to bed, and said "good night." "We'll have a talk to-morrow." The girl's large eyes followed the brilliant figure to the door.

"I wonder if Alec will let me keep her," thought Carrie as she went to her own room—"and I wonder—if she really knows."

But then all thought of Joyce—of anything else in the wide world was swept away by the recollection that she and Alec had quarrelled—almost quarrelled—for the first time in their lives; and by the passionate expectation of his return to her.

She waited for him in darkness; and when he came he brought the emotion of reconciliation, of murmured words given and received, of long embraces and tears kissed away. His will was to prevail in the ordering of their new life, as in all else; and for her jealousy of Mrs. Whitton she was much mocked at, and soon shamed.

## CHAPTER VII

IN a drawing-room of a little house in West Square, Buckingham Gate, Mrs. Whitton was sitting up late over her accounts. She was much worried by them, and her eyes showed dark rims of fatigue. It was certainly annoyingly true that she had been getting rather deeply into debt. Apparently it was not possible to maintain a remarkable position, once you had achieved it, so cheaply as she had once fondly thought. What with the little lunches to Cabinet Ministers, and little frocks for Ascot, or the Opera, or week-ends, and little journeys to Italy in the spring, or to Paris in the winter, from which one returned primed with the latest literary or artistic or dramatic information, life was really unreasonably expensive. Mrs. Whitton had a kind of injured feeling about it, like that of a person who has been overcharged. It ought not to cost *her* so much to live, because she returned society so much more for its money than other people.

However, society, as represented by dressmakers, milliners, bootmakers, and her household books, did not seem to be of the same opinion; and there were the bills! The tone of the letters accompanying the bills, also, was changing disagreeably, and Madge felt that something would have to be done. Her money however was her own. There were no tiresome trustees to interfere. She could always sell out something. But of course there is an end to that process some time.

Oh, what it would be to have unlimited money! Like the Wings for instance! Mrs. Whitton fell back in her chair with closed eyes, and bathed a hungry fancy in the golden memories of Eltham House. The perfection of that dinner!—of every detail of food, service, wine, the gorgeous flowers and fruit, that buffet of historic silver at the end of the room, the lighting, the pictures—everything! Why should the Wings possess so much—and others so little? She supposed Caroline Wing had a housekeeper, and a major-domo, not to speak of the already famous *chef*, and never troubled herself personally about anything. She had simply to press a button, and the thing was done, so to speak. "So many people to lunch or dinner to-day," "a reception to-morrow night," "a concert Friday"—and she didn't probably even condescend to pay the bills herself! It was all done for her by some magnificent slave of the lamp in the background.

Well, of course, the invitations, the matching of people, which is the really important business in any social success, couldn't be done in that way, by Caroline Wing or anybody else. But Mrs. Whitton felt sorely that with such opportunities, such backing, and such a purse, she could have pitted herself against any rival whatever and beaten them. The mistress of Eltham House was certainly making a name and place for herself in this hostile London. Madge Whitton did not deny it. She simply denied the performance any special merit at all. Given Eltham House, Lord Wing's money, and a very moderate intelligence, the thing was bound to succeed! Up to a certain point—*bien entendu!*

At the same time if the truth were known, there was already in the mind of this very successful little "climber," a certain social jealousy of Caroline Wing,

mingled with the envy of her money. There were certain prominent men with whom Madge Whitton had never really felt herself successful—Robert Llewellyn, and Mr. Washington, in particular—and two or three others, who were among the most coveted guests of the moment in political London. They accepted her invitations, because no one could arrange a small party better, and because in her pleasant rooms, such men found another opportunity for the only recreation which really attracted them, good talk, without noise, or overcrowding, or bores, with people who shared the same interests, and understood the short-hand of each other's conversation. But Madge had noticed already in the tone of such men towards Caroline Wing, a touch of tenderness, of something intimate, gentle, profound, which she resented as a kind of rebuff to herself, because she had never been able to evoke it. Must one go to all lengths, as Caroline Wing had done, before one became really interesting to the men best worth knowing?

Of course Alec Wing was amusing, and by now a constant frequenter of the house in West Square. She thought with a certain thrill of his physical perfections—his open, handsome face, his clustering hair, and gallant bearing. It was true apparently that he had not resigned his commission in the Guards of his own accord, but had been forced to do so by the action of his brother officers. That showed how strong a feeling there was in some quarters, even among men of the world. No doubt because of John Marsworth's high reputation—his many friends in the army—his exploits in the Boer War, and the rest of it.

"All very well, but I couldn't have lived with John Marsworth for six weeks!" thought Madge Whitton. "My old man was tiresome enough, but—John Marsworth!" She remembered a chance encounter with

him, in the country house of one of her relations years before, when she was only seventeen, and he was still unmarried. She had tried to flirt with him, at first successfully, and then had been aware of a sudden flinty change in him—of something contemptuous, before which she shrank. Was it because he had come to know of certain passages between her and another man in the house—an older man married to one of her own cousins—and of the young wife's distress? Her conscience admitted it might have been so. Well, anyhow he was a bigot and a martinet, and any wife not entirely subservient must have had a bad time with him.

So that the charm of Alec Wing for anyone who had been condemned to eight years of Marsworth was easily understood. How agreeable he could make himself to the people he wished to please—"to me, for instance!" Impossible for such a being to understand that there really did exist a great many sensible people determined to send him to Coventry! He himself could be so friendly, so easy-going; and always so sorry—apparently—for people less prosperous than himself.

And she thought of a hint she had dropped—the slightest—of being hard up—and his quick, compassionate look; followed by shyness, lest he should say anything indiscreet, anything to wound her feelings. He needn't have been afraid!—"though I've never let a man help me out yet," she thought, not without pride. But again the recollection of the Wing wealth came stinging across her. Why, it would cost Alec Wing nothing—just nothing!—to lend a friend a thousand pounds. A signature on a piece of paper!—something never felt—which need never be remembered. And again she closed her eyes and let fancy play. All her bills—the bank overdraft—Cousin Kate's loan—every-

thing!—swept away and smoothed out. She drew a long, sighing breath.

"I should like to know when you're going to bed," said a gruff voice from the door.

Madge turned to see her middle-aged maid, formerly her nurse—by name Anne Street—bending disapproving eyes on her from the doorway. Street was a power in the West Square household, its real ruler in fact. It was she who did all the practical work; who managed the lackadaisical Miss Elwood, "Cousin Kate," the lady who played chaperon to Mrs. Whitton and also contributed a solid three hundred a year to the expenses; and it was she who kept a sharp eye on the tradesmen and the servants, and one not less sharp on Madge Whitton herself. Madge acknowledged her indispensable; was fond of her; and groaned under her.

"Go away, Anne," she said crossly, at sight of her domestic mentor; "go away, and go to bed. I'm doing my accounts."

Instead of obeying, Anne came into the room, and began to pick up some of the litter of books, letters, and newspapers with which it was strewn.

"There are two new hats come from Madame Thérèse," she said severely, after a pause. Her mouth opened and closed on the words like a steel trap. It made a straight slit, almost lipless, in her face, which possessed besides a pair of pale blue eyes, a nondescript nose, and a square chin. She was very stout, and seemed to be bursting out of her clothes, which never appeared to have either colour or make. She had a right to Madge's cast-offs, but as she never wore any of them, Madge could only suppose that she sold them to advantage. If so, her mistress was uneasily aware that some of the money was probably—indeed certainly—used, in paying some of her mistress's



small and constantly forgotten debts. It should be added that she belonged to an obscure dissenting body, and entertained a curious scorn, not unmixed with compassion, for the rich and prosperous.

"Well, I *wanted* another hat," said Mrs. Whitton, with an attempt at dignity. "And I'll thank you, Anne, not to interfere."

"You've more than you can wear in a week of Sundays upstairs already. We'd better have paid for some of them first."

Madge bent over her accounts in silence, pretending not to hear.

"And if you go on, sitting up like this, you'll be ill," pursued the harsh voice; "and then there'll be doctors to pay for."

"For goodness' sake, go away, Anne!—and let me alone!" The maid looked at her quite unmoved.

"If I don't bring it home to you, no one else will," she said doggedly. "You can't go on like this. Miss Elwood told me last night, she wouldn't lend you another farthing."

"Well, you goose, I can always sell out."

"Yes, so long as there's anything to sell—which won't be long. We ought to leave this house—and take up another way of living altogether," said Anne, coming to sit down heavily beside her mistress. "You'll be in Queer Street—you know you will—if this goes on."

"How you croak, Anne!"

"No. It's true," persisted the other.

Mrs. Whitton looked round her drawing-room with a sigh. She was very proud of her little house, its taste, its convenience, its social capabilities. It was identified with her—part of her—all her friends praised it. How odious to have to go and live in a cheaper

part of town—or in a flat! So much depends too on having a particular *gîte*—with its atmosphere and associations—where people can always find you. “And there never was a flat yet that had any individuality,” she thought. “I hate them!”

“Go to bed, Anne!” she repeated, as she rose with a stretch. “And I’ll come too. You may brush my hair for me; it’s coming out abominably. I shall soon have to buy some.”

“There’s never a blessing on bought hair,” said Anne sententiously, beginning to put out the lights. “You’ve got to put up with it. The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away. All the same it’s nonsense. You’ve got plenty.”

And in the neighbouring bedroom, when Mrs. Whitton unloosed her fair coils, Anne enjoyed one of her few pleasures in brushing them. She did it with a thoroughness which sometimes evoked protests from the patient; and few people watching the process would have guessed at the strength of passionate and yet clear-eyed and disapproving affection with which she regarded the young woman under her hands. But Madge knew herself loved, and to do her justice, was not ungrateful.

She lay awake, afterwards, thinking of her difficulties, and thinking also of a visit which Alec Wing was to pay her on the morrow. He had paid her a good many lately. One could only suppose that Caroline Wing knew and approved! For there could be no doubt that the two sinners were still deeply in love with each other. As far as appearances went—anyway!

“But one simply can’t help flirting with him!” thought Madge sleepily. “I don’t believe Elizabeth Washington herself could—if he gave her the chance.

. . . Suppose I asked his advice about investments. There couldn't be any harm in getting a few tips. Why, Lord Wing must be made of them! And I daresay I can do something for him. I have done him some good turns already. But if he's really set his heart on Parliament—silly fellow!—let's think!—who could help, that I know?"

And running over names in her head, she fell asleep.

"Lucky beggars!" thought Alec Wing, as he stopped to look at a private omnibus that was being loaded up before a house in Eaton Square. Evidently a family going north—perhaps to Scotland—in preparation for the Twelfth. Guns and cartridge cases, mixed up with miscellaneous luggage; fishing rods strapped together, etc. Meanwhile, in the London Square, autumn was already visible, though it was but the first week of August. The leaves were beginning to drift downwards on the lifeless air; many blinds were drawn.

The moors! Wing thought it was about time to be getting out of this dusty wilderness. Brown plashing water and grey stones; the white flicker of a trout in a mountain burn; stretches of pink heather with the hot sun wringing its scent from it, and the bright wind beating over it, the rush of the grouse, and the friendly faces of the dogs:—these images came in teasing swarms about him. He himself had rented a famous moor for the season, and Carrie had arranged a series of parties for the later autumn. But he and she had long since made up their minds to stay out Parliament in London. In these last weeks of the Parliamentary session, it was easy to get hold of the busy men, in a more intimate and informal way than was possible

amid the "social junketings" of June and July. One could sift out the people who mattered, and let the rest go. No more miscellaneous crowds! But every night the beautiful house was open to its favoured guests. A few people to dinner, almost exclusively men; politicians, soldiers, officials, men of letters, artists; and after dinner, "Mrs. Wing, At Home," night after night, to a circle of people—again, mostly men—who already felt themselves in some sort a corporate entity, a recognised body, with incipient powers, and common interests; above all, a common loyalty to the beautiful and attractive woman who was beginning—after three months' continuous effort—to show what she might be capable of in the future, as a social artist. And as for her past, while half the world still shunned and condemned her, the other half were being rapidly caught and disarmed by those brown eyes of hers—their wistful humanity, their passion.

"By Jove! Carrie's superb!"—was the recurring thought of her young husband as he walked on through the August streets. The "little girl" had been useful, too. Joyce Allen was promising to become a lieutenant worth having. It was evident that she was devoted to Carrie, who seemed to have won her heart, as usual. She had now promised to stay with them for a year. In some ways she was an odd customer. The allowance—*alias* salary—which Carrie had offered her had been refused as too generous. The young lady had finally accepted half, Carrie having pointed out that a certain number of pretty frocks for Mrs. Wing's cousin, who now appeared at all her "evenings," was really indispensable. Altogether, rather an inscrutable little being! So maidenly—and yet so independent! Carrie was certain that various common relatives had tried to dissuade her from coming to Eltham House—had

indeed cut her since she arrived there. And yet there she was—a fixture.

How much did she know of the "Wing divorce case"? Not a word or a look revealed. Yet about the slight figure and all its ways there floated a kind of fragrance of delicate feeling and high conscience, which Wing at any rate sometimes found embarrassing. It seemed to him, however, that to have the little creature at her side did something to mend the wounds and slights that British Philistinism must needs go on aiming at Caroline. And if so, and it suited her to keep the girl—by all means! But why should Jim Durrant have taken to fooling round with the young woman? It was absurd—and it was unkind besides. For although Jim was not rich, he was very well born, and well-connected; his parents and sisters were ambitious for him, and not the least likely to welcome such a little Cinderella in the part of Jim's wife, without a severe struggle. To do the child justice, she could not be said to encourage him; but there he was perpetually, doing her errands and Caroline's, and becoming, so far as his military duties allowed, the tame cat of the house. Alec Wing, from his height of superior wisdom as a married man of eighteen months' standing, thought that Jim was behaving foolishly, and that something must be done.

And as to his own affairs? It was now three weeks since he and Caroline had had their first quarrel, and everything was still in suspense. As a matter of fact, his wife's arguments had impressed him more than either he or she had known at the time. Also Hull had not been captured. The Government candidate had just held the seat. The Tory spirits had improved, and even Alec was forced to admit that the chances of an election were receding. But meanwhile

there was fresh news as to the Midland seat on which he had his eye. The old fellow who held it had not been seen in the House of Commons for months; and the newspapers of that morning reported him as dying. There was an excellent sporting chance of capturing the seat; and the man who achieved it would be the hero of the hour. And there the great bribe lay still, warm and waiting to be used, at Wing's disposal. He was in twenty minds—but once more vehemently inclined to risk it.

"Mrs. Whitton at home?"

The pretty parlourmaid, whose cap and dress showed the artistic hand of her mistress, admitted him without difficulty, and as he entered the pale green drawing-room, well screened from the August sun, Mrs. Whitton, in white, rose smiling to meet him.

"Still in town?" she said, as she pointed him to a chair. "I couldn't believe it, when I got your telephone messages yesterday. Why aren't you shooting?"

"Because there may be other things more important! And you?—Why aren't *you* on the move? I expect you've more invitations than you know what to do with!"

"A good many invitations"—she admitted. Then—with a sigh—"But I'm too poor."

"Too poor? Nonsense!" His laugh sounded embarrassed.

"I can't afford the frocks! It's perfectly appalling what the frocks are coming to now, in country houses."

"Do without them!"

"So easy for a man to say! Ask an officer to do without his uniforms. My frocks are just as much *de rigueur*."

He shook his head gaily, showing his white teeth.

They sparred a little; and then she abruptly changed her tone.

"All very well to laugh—but it's serious. I'm afraid—I shall have to give up this house."

"Give up the house? Why it's part of you!—you've made it so jolly!"

And he turned his brilliant head to look round the room, which had a pleasant emptiness, entirely devoid of the usual feminine litter, in which a few beautiful things—drawings, antiques, engravings—showed themselves, without jostling, and chairs of all sizes, in many nooks and corners, suggested talk without crowding.

"Yes—I've been here a good while. I've made it. It's full of memories. But—well, it can't be helped!"

And suddenly, he saw the eyes which were her chief beauty fill with tears.

\* Wing's easy susceptibility was touched. He moved nearer to her.

"I'm awfully sorry! Is it really——"

She laughed—hysterically.

"Really so bad? Well, I don't want to be in the courts. I should be all right if my investments would only pay as they used to do."

"Investments?" He hesitated, flushed, and at last put the natural questions—"what are they?—what's the matter? Can I help?" She laughed again—beat about the bush—was alternately proud, and appealing—and finally threw herself on his help. "If I only had someone to advise me! But what can a woman do—all alone!"

It ended in his making a list of all her investments in his pocket-book, and promising to ask his father how they could be improved. Nor was this all. He mentioned a great coal and iron business—one of the most

famous in the north—just about to turn itself into a limited company, and raise fresh capital.

Her eyes suddenly flamed.

"Heavens!—if one could get in there, before the public!"

He smiled.

"My father's sure to have a large slice. Suppose I get hold of—what?—a thousand shares?—and let you have them?"

She clasped her hands.

"Oh, if you *could*!"

"Well—leave it to me!" He smiled down upon her rather guiltily, conscious of Carrie, and Carrie's jealousy, at the back of his mind, but all the same enjoying the rôle of benefactor to this little woman who had given him many pleasant hours, and introduced him to not a few profitable people since his return to London. She smiled in return, all radiance, and then bending over, she laid her hand lightly on his. Somehow—at the touch—the recollection of a moment long gone by under the trees of an Oxford garden recurred to both. He slightly drew back his chair.

"Well now"—his voice had taken another tone—"didn't you say something to me—yesterday—through the telephone—about Maurice Black, Captain Black, possibly coming here this afternoon?"

"Certainly!" Mrs. Whitton got up and rang the bell for tea. "He promised to come. You want a talk with him?"

"I do."

After giving the order, Madge came back to her seat, and studied the male countenance before her, her fingers lightly joined upon her lap. In the mirror on the opposite wall, she was dimly aware of a reflection of herself—golden hair, with the light behind it, slim



figure, and lines of white drapery; a reflection which gave her pleasure—and confidence—while she talked.

"You're looking out for a constituency?"

He admitted it, adding frankly that she knew as well as he did the difficulties in the way.

Madge considered, saying after a minute, with apparent irrelevance—

"The party's even more 'stony' than I am! How *can* we fight?"

"Is that what—Washington—says to you?" He paused on the name.

"No. He's not a great friend of mine. But I've other means of knowing it. I do know it."

"Well, I suppose Maurice Black—as a Junior Whip—could tell us all there is to know," laughed Wing. "I understand he's very well in with his Chief."

"I don't think he knows much. The Chief—Sir Lawrence Penwenack, keeps everything in his own hands. Nobody else, they say, knows where the funds are. Certainly no one else signs cheques. Maurice has raked in a few big subscriptions lately, but not nearly enough. They're *awfully* hard up! There are quite thirty seats they can't fight—that they ought to fight."

"H'm. So the Chief—Sir Lawrence—has the sole responsibility. I wonder if that's really true?" He pondered, his eyes fixed upon her. Was it at all likely that a woman—that this woman, knew anything substantial about it? But her cool self-confidence impressed him.

"Absolutely true. Washington knows scarcely anything about the funds. Maurice tells me so, at least. He doesn't want to know!"

Wing laughed.

"Sensible man! Why should he know? Much better not. Well now—but this, mind, is a secret!"—

he turned round to look at her full—"I've been trying to persuade my father to come down handsomely."

"Lord Wing!" She clasped her hands again. "But that is interesting! Will he save us?"

"On conditions!" said Wing, lightly but deliberately.

Their eyes met. "You see"—he added—"I want my career."

She studied him quietly.

"Of course you do. And why shouldn't you have it? Now, what can I do? Will you stay to see Maurice, or will you trust me to—well, give a message?"

"I can't imagine a better diplomat!" he said, after a moment, smiling at her. Yet it was evident that some meditation had preceded the smile.

Her expression grew more serious.

"I must have things a little plainer. Do I understand that Lord Wing wishes to help the party—generously?"

"Generously."

"One hears such odd stories! I remember there was a silly tale—two or three years ago—of an American million——"

"Ah, well—we don't do things on that scale!" laughed Alec. "But wouldn't a tenth go a long way?"

Mrs. Whitton delicately poured herself out another cup of tea, and made no reply. Wing examined a photograph beside him.

"Lady Aysgarth—one of my best friends—isn't she charming?" said Madge, slowly sipping her tea. "Well now—tell me about that constituency? I see the old man is dying."

Wing's expression kindled.

"I believe I could win it for them!" he said, with energy. "Here is what I know."

And he plunged into an analysis of his chances, every detail of which she discussed with him. The shrewdness and quickness of her mind struck him with amazement—her knowledge of the ins and outs, the by-ways, the tricks and shifts, the cruder and corrupter sides of politics. To discuss politics with Carrie had begun to bore him. There was something large and romantic in the way she took them, which was not really at all congenial to him. It was said of Lord Randolph Churchill that he "loved life and despised ideas." Wing was instinctively cold to ideas. It was the clash of the mere game that attracted him. But on Carrie ideas were beginning to lay hold; perhaps under the influence of some of the men who were now forming a little court round her. And Madge Whitton's talk, alive to all the harder and baser facts, her quick practical mind, ready to chaffer with anybody and about everything, suited this handsome fellow, for all his gallant poetic looks, a great deal better. He listened to her eagerly—drinking in all her suggestions; and they were still quite absorbed in each other's conversation, when the drawing-room door opened again to admit "Mr. Maurice Black."

After some discursive talk *à trois*, Wing took his leave, and the new-comer stood in the background watching his departure. He was a lightly-built man of forty, with a prominent nose and forehead, hair already grizzled, and a chin slightly underhung. A look of ability; expressions that rather masked than revealed the man; amiable manners, and faultless dress:—such was the outer aspect.

The Junior Whip was a rising politician, much employed—said his enemies—on the muddier jobs of

politics. He was a constant visitor to the house, and as he was still a bachelor, rumour had often connected his name with that of the young widow. In reality both understood each other far too well.

"Sit down!" said Mrs. Whitton, raising her hand, with smiling peremptoriness, as she turned back from the closed door—"I have got something *very* interesting to say to you."

Black obeyed her, chose a particularly comfortable chair, crossed his knees, and prepared himself indulgently for the latest gossip. He had been employed all day in trying to settle an odious dispute between a Liberal and Labour candidate for a London seat, and Madge Whitton's tea and Madge Whitton's company seemed to him the very least of what was due to him.

His hostess, however, in spite of her promising beginning, was some time in opening fire. She gave him tea, and instead of amusing him, she made him describe the adventures of his own day. This suddenly struck him as so unfair that he flatly refused to go on. Let her explain herself—instantly.

Then putting delicate hand to cheek, she considered, her eyes upon him.

"So you really *are* expecting an election?—if you spend so much time and trouble on a silly quarrel like this?"

"Of course something may always force an election—in a situation like ours."

"But you don't want it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Our situation is too unfavourable—you know it!"

"Well now—I have a little suggestion to make to you—a mission! Isn't that amusing? I feel so important! Would a large sum"—she named it—"make

the difference?" And dropping her graceful head a little to one side, she watched him.

He sat up at once, all attention.

"Well of course it would make a difference!—perhaps all the difference. Does someone want a peerage?"

She shook her head.

"A Privy Councillorship?"

"Neither—*Find Alec Wing a seat!*"

The words, though low-spoken, came out sharp and clear, as though a shot found its target.

He gave a low whistle—then smiled.

"I see—that's your mission."

She nodded, drew her work-basket towards her, and took out a piece of embroidery. After a few moments she said, without looking up—

"Can you do it?"

"I'm thinking. You know of course the fuss that we have been making about the case on the other side?"

The reference was to a divorce case, affecting a prominent Tory peer, who had been forced to resign a subordinate post in the Government, as soon as the first rumours of the affair appeared in the newspapers.

"I know all about it. But this case is two years old."

"You think that improves it?"

"Certainly. People have had time to get accustomed to it—and they're married."

"I admit that makes a difference—but—no, I don't think it can be done! Of course, it's Lord Wing?"

He eyed her keenly.

"Of course. Who else could it be?"

"Old heathen! Just like him to try such a coup!"

He paced the room, much excited—his lips working.

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She watched the bribe working in his blood. At the last he turned upon her—

“You’re safe?”

“Absolutely.” She looked up gaily.

“And the Wings too? I imagine they’re not fools. They’ll be advised? And they can hold their tongues?”

“They’re certainly not fools!”

“Well, well—I must go—I’ll see to it—and you shall hear.”

He shook her hurriedly by the hand, and departed.

Madge lay back in her chair awhile, her hands behind her head; her look joyous and absorbed.

## CHAPTER VIII

**R**OBERT LLEWELLYN, Privy Councillor and member of Parliament, lived in one of the streets opening off Portland Place. He was unmarried, and the ancient Welsh dame who looked after his household, and kept it in spotless order, was the widow of one of his farmers on the small Welsh estate which meant practically nothing to him in point of money—for he had a large and lucrative practice at the criminal bar—but an infinity in the way of tradition and association. One of the most self-controlled of orators, and one of the shrewdest of lawyers, he yet possessed, deep down, the characteristic Celtic qualities—the power of dreaming awake—contempt for some of the commonest standards of value—instinctive sympathy for the under-dog.

His house was full of books, and in the bare drawing-room on the first floor it possessed a piano, on which Llewellyn himself occasionally played, with great exactness of finger and severity of taste. Modern music did not appeal to him. Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart and Beethoven, were enough for him, which, considering the passionate modernness of his taste in literature and poetry, was rather surprising. He devoured the young poets of the day, and was personally acquainted with many of them; he was wondrously learned in the contemporary French, or Italian, or Spanish novels, and yet when his briefs or Parliamentary business allowed, he was apt to plunge back into the Classics, especially

Homer and Sophocles, as the best means he knew of raising "a man's mind out of the dirt." But he was none the less an excellent gossip, with something of the cheerful old maid in his composition, and when on some off day, Mrs. Evans was allowed to bring him afternoon tea, and invited to sit and chat a bit while he drank it, the two might have been taken for a pair of village cronies, laughing and squabbling over the simplest and humblest affairs—generally concerned with the twenty small farms and the one straggling village which, far away in Breconshire among the Black Mountains, owned Robert Llewellyn as landlord; where he always spent some three or four weeks of the year, in a tumble-down country-house, on the edge of a small lake. At the same time he was a growing power in Parliament and politics, Washington's lieutenant on the front Opposition Bench, and increasingly followed and trusted in the country. Some people found it hard to understand why. When told so, his friends laughed and did not trouble to explain.

It was a Friday evening. Llewellyn having refused with glee the week-end invitation of a duchess, with a view of getting for once a Sunday to himself, had dined alone in one of his oldest coats, and was now seated in the drawing-room, tranquilly smoking, with a cargo of new foreign books strewn around him. The windows were open, but the street was quiet. London had gone into the country. He looked out occasionally, through the mingled lights and shadows of the evening, noticing the few dim people passing along the pavement, and the effect of a patch of evening sky at the end of a side vista; enjoying the physical and mental rest of the moment with a positive and acute pleasure. "Now"—he said to himself,—“I know what the Greeks meant by ἀραξία.”



Immediately after this reflection the telephone rang. Smiling at himself, and the small ironies of life, he went to take the message.

"Hullo!—who is it? *You!* I thought you were at Windsor?"

"Next week—I'm having a holiday in town. I thought you were at——"

"Not if I knew it! Do you want to see me?"

"Yes. Will you be in if I come round?"

"By all means. Or shall I come to you?"

"No. We shall be less disturbed, if I come to you."

Llewellyn put down the receiver, rang for Mrs. Evans, to order some coffee, and began to pick up the paper-bound books lying on the floor. What could Richard Washington want with him at that time of night? He knew of nothing new in the political field. In the House of Commons the Government were getting through, and in his opinion they were going to get through, and would wind up the session without disaster. He had always said so, in spite of beautiful Mrs. Wing, and her circle of hot-heads.

And as he sat waiting for Washington, he fell into a reverie on the subject of Caroline Wing. It was quite true that he was becoming very deeply interested in her. Her character, impulsive, wilful, passionate, yet always sincere, attracted him; her beauty was a perpetual charm for one in whom all the æsthetic susceptibilities were sharply developed; her situation, with its possibilities, its mingling of danger and magnificence, awoke in him a kind of tender and fatherly interest. He was not however fast becoming her most intimate man friend without some self-examination. But so far as he knew his own mind, there was no danger to *her*, from the devotion of the middle-aged man, with the snub nose and ample figure, whose reflection he saw every morning in his

looking-glass. The brilliance of her outer life, and of that vast social effort on which she was launched, as compared with what seemed to him the hollowness of her happiness—it was on this he was always pondering after their frequent meetings. He felt for her a sharpness of pity which surprised himself, and depended almost entirely on his judgment of the character of Alec Wing.

Meanwhile it was evident both that young Lord Melton was losing his head, and that Mrs. Wing, in her complete absorption in her husband, was not only indifferent to the young man except so far as he might be profitable to Alec, but quite unconscious of what might be said, what was of course beginning to be said, about his constant visits to Eltham House, and his undisguised infatuation. Could an elderly friend venture a hint of counsel? He discovered in himself an absolute distrust of Wing as her protector.

Mrs. Evans brought up the coffee, Llewellyn put out his best cigars, and in a few minutes more the door opened to admit his political chief, whom he had last seen some hours before at the House of Commons, in the private room of the Leader of the Opposition.

Llewellyn went eagerly to meet him.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing political," said Washington, as he took the arm-chair pointed out to him, and helped himself to a cigar. "At least—not directly political. But I wanted to consult you."

He pulled thoughtfully at his cigar for a while however, before opening his business, and Llewellyn did not hurry him. He had a great liking and a loyal respect for Washington, though he was by no means certain yet that the adroit party leader who had stepped into his present conspicuous post rather through a series

of accidents than because of any commanding personal claims, was going to turn out a great man. But it was on the cards that he might so turn out. And meanwhile he was trusted—and deserved it. And no doubt the stately presence of the man—his clear challenging eyes, the kingly carriage of his broad shoulders—had played a considerable part in the growth of his ascendancy, both in and out of the House of Commons.

"I have had a bribe offered to me," said Washington, abruptly. "And I want to know what you think—whether the party can accept it?"

Llewellyn looked up attentively.

"We can't make any peers—*yet!*" he said, smiling.

Washington shook his head.

"It's not quite so simple as that. And yet, of course"—the tone was good-humouredly ironic—"the proposal itself is simplicity itself. It is just this. Lord Wing offers us a hundred thousand pounds down—for the party funds—if we will provide his son with a constituency, and back him—officially."

He spoke deliberately, looking his colleague in the eyes.

Llewellyn's eyebrows lifted.

"So Alec Wing has taken that plunge?"

Washington nodded.

"The offer comes through the Whips—and partly—through a woman. You will agree there's always a woman in such a pie! Penwenack thought the matter so important that he finally decided he could not settle it by himself, and so, for once, he came to me. Of course, in general, I never know, and never inquire about the funds."

"Well—and I suppose you refused?" said Llewellyn, after a pause.

"Penwenack was with me before dinner. I told him

to look in again, on his way back from the theatre to-night, and I came over to see you. As to our need of money—it's almost absurd. We can't fight the elections we ought to fight—the publication department is starved—candidates are discouraged—but you know it all. Well, of course the first thing to say about Lord Wing's condition is, that if we accepted it, we should have a row—a bad row! The commotion at Hull in all the religious circles—Anglican and Dissenting—when it was realised that Wing was coming down to speak for our candidate, was, they tell me, astounding. Man after man refused to stand on the same platform with him, and most of the women working for our man—practically all of them—would have thrown up."

"The Marsworths have strong local influence in and round Hull," mused Llewellyn. "That man Henry Marsworth will hunt down Wing if he can. He is an implacable sort of beggar, and devoted to his brother."

Then he raised his eyes.

"What—if I may ask—are your own feelings about it?"

Washington laughed—with a slight embarrassment.

"Ought I to have any feelings of my own? But if you want them—it doesn't seem to *me* that a man's private love-affairs—except of course in the case of something flagrantly disgraceful—have anything to do with his political career. I have always thought Parnell hardly used. Everybody knew!—and nobody stirred, till he was found out!"

"All the same—you would have done just the same as Mr. G.," said Llewellyn with decision. "Isn't it the finding out that counts—politically? As you say, politics are not concerned—generally speaking—with a man's love affairs—*till they come into court*. Then they become political material."

"Perhaps"—said Washington slowly—"perhaps. Well, that is what I meant by asking whether one's own feelings had anything to do with it. What we have to think of—naturally—is the party. Would the party gain more from Lord Wing's cheque, than it would suffer from backing his son——"

"Plus the possibility of the bargain getting out," put in Llewellyn, smiling.

"Well, the bargain would be pretty obvious wouldn't it? No, it won't do—it *won't do!* All the same"—the speaker sighed—"we are in a devil of a hole financially—and the temptation has been sore—I can see—even for Penwenack."

"Ask Mrs. Washington!" said Llewellyn, after a moment.

Certain furrows appeared in Washington's broad brow. "Oh, I know very well what she would think," was the quick reply. "She holds very strict views. It is one of her attractions towards woman suffrage that it would brighten up the standards of character in public men."

Llewellyn smiled, a little dubiously. "Would it? Mrs. Washington must remember that there are plenty of women nowadays—all the advanced feminists—who would take precisely the opposite view! Caroline Marsworth had ceased to care for her husband—the immorality, in their opinion, would have lain in staying with him."

"Ah, but they don't count yet—that sort—politically," said Washington, his eyes twinkling. "Let them wait till they have got rid of the vast majority of women who still prefer to keep the word 'obey' in the marriage service. What we have to deal with is the general tightening up—for *men*—of the connection between public service and private morals. Something

quite new in our days! In previous generations the unfaithful wife has always been tabooed; the seducer has always got off scot free. When Lord and Lady Holland——”

“Ah, that struck you!”

“Of course. Well, that was a hundred years ago. The Hollands had done, as near as possible, what the Wings have done. Lady Holland was boycotted for years by all but a handful of women—but *he*—not a bit of it: He went everywhere, was welcome everywhere—especially in each Whig Government, as it came along. But now no Liberal Government would touch him with a barge-pole! Morals?—or hypocrisy?”

“Neither! The rise of the Protestant middle-class! . . . But the distinguishing feature of *this* business is the part in it played by money—sheer cash!”—said Llewellyn, after a pause. “That was absent from the Holland’s case.”

“Not entirely. There was Holland House. But the bribe here is far more gross and palpable. It was dressed up of course in Lord Wing’s letter. But the meaning of it was as plain, as if the cheque had been pushed under our noses. I shouldn’t wonder if Lord Wing had been deliberately influenced by the Holland case. It would be like his queer kind of humour. Well!—things don’t repeat themselves.”

Both men smoked in silence for a time. Then after a little more discussion, Washington looked up.

“I see you’re a friend of hers?”

“Of Mrs. Wing? Certainly. You, too!”

“A fine creature!” said Washington, his brown eyes softening. “She wins on us all. Why did she do it! The man’s not her equal!”

“Why did Helen listen to Paris?” laughed Llewellyn. “It’s the eternal situation. The dull husband—

the beautiful woman, rebellious and dissatisfied—the splendid youth——”

“And the ‘Aurum vestibus illitum’?” put in Washington.

The slight gleam in the eyes of his companion—an ex-Craven scholar like himself—showed that the Horatian tag pleased. Llewellyn resumed—with energy—

“This woman took no account of that! Now—what I dread is the third stage.”

“When she finds him out? Why should she? Give her some advice, can’t you? Let her set him to *work*! He’ll live it down in time. But he can’t ride roughshod, by simply rattling a bag of gold. He’s got to recognise that. Well!”—the Leader rose—“So we’re agreed—you and I? Penwenack can’t have that cheque!”

“Not on those terms. But I suggest a moving appeal to Lord Wing’s disinterested love of Liberal principles!”

Washington laughed. They moved towards the door, where Washington made a pause.

“Don’t let’s imagine”—his mouth showed a little smile, “we’ve been doing anything heroic!”

“Quite the contrary!” said Llewellyn dryly. “By the way, I may as well hand on to you the report I got from a neighbour of Lord Wing’s this morning—his Lord Lieutenant—that his state of health is bad—some people think alarming.”

“That opens new vistas!” said Washington, with a shrug. “Well, then the young man will get his chance in the Lords. But go and see her, Llewellyn. Tell her to hold him in. Poor thing! It’s she that interests me in the whole business. Somehow—there she is, with all that wealth, and that beauty—that

vast house!—and something tragic about her all the time.”

“I feel the same,” said Llewellyn, gravely. They grasped hands and Washington departed.

Washington made his way home.

As he entered his library, where he expected the Chief Whip, a tall figure rose from a seat by the window. It was his wife. She approached him, and he saw her wide grey eyes, and the question in them.

“All right,” he said abruptly. “We shan’t do it.”

He turned away to his writing-table, where presently she followed him.

“Good night, dearest!”

Something in her quiet satisfaction stung him a little.

“You good women are terribly cocksure about these things,” he broke out, with some vehemence, looking up at her.

“Only for the sake of other women—” she said softly—“and children.”

He made no reply. She laid a caressing hand on his shoulder, and went away.

The following evening, in consequence of a telephone conversation with its mistress, Llewellyn arrived at Eltham House for dinner. It had astonished him greatly to find the Wings in town for an August week-end. But it suggested to him—as did their lingering on in town—an anxious waiting on events.

The magnificent gentleman in the hall, with whom he was now on the most friendly terms, informed him that Mr. Wing was away. Captain Durrant and Miss Allen were upstairs.

Llewellyn mounted in some trepidation. Had Penwenack’s letter arrived, and if so, what sort of a reception awaited him? Not likely! Penwenack was a



leisurely person, and took some time over an important letter.

Caroline received him, indeed, with her usual gay effusion; and they dined in an open balcony or loggia overlooking the garden, and tapestried with rambler roses red and white. Alec, she said, was playing golf, and would not be home till late. It was awfully good of him to take pity on her. And she had wanted to say good-bye; for they were really off now—in a very few days.

He presently perceived, however, that she was tired, excited—and on edge. And it was plain to him that her two devoted companions knew it too. How that little Miss Allen had fitted in! She had lost her extreme shyness; though nothing of her pretty modesty and tact. It was evident that Mrs. Wing was beginning to lean upon her tremendously; and that the girl was picking up things with astonishing quickness. And he perceived already a close alliance between her and Durrant, in Mrs. Wing's interest. Whether there was anything else in it, who could say!—but the young man's eyes and conversation had certainly a constant trick of wandering in the little cousin's direction. She wore the simplest of white frocks, and Caroline, declaring that the night was chilly, had wrapped round her a costly lace hood and cloak, from which the girl's deep fawn eyes and gentle face shone rather incongruously.

Caroline herself was in black, and Llewellyn found her alternately touching—and superb. She talked but little politics; and through all the chatter about music and books, he seemed to feel in her the tremor of something captured and in pain.

After dinner she led the way into the garden, and Llewellyn found himself pacing a long trellised walk

with her, under a glorious though stormy moonlight. She moved beside him—dim and queenly; and he became more disagreeably conscious every minute that something had got to be said, and that it was uncommonly difficult to say it. He applied to a cigarette for inspiration, and they walked for a while in silence through the hot exhausted air.

Between the branches of the trees girdling the garden shone the lights of distant houses; in one corner the slender complicated lines of a newly-erected wireless apparatus, on the top of a public building, made a curiously pleasant pattern—sharply black—on the night sky; while, far and near, London seemed to be talking round them, in a thousand low blurred voices, and the lights of innumerable streets, striking heavenward, were reflected back and down among the quiet spaces of the garden, and under the old planes. So that the garden produced no sylvan illusion, in spite of its great trees and dense leaf; it was always London—masquerading. The dry earth and the tired flowers sent forth no fragrance. And the withered leaves lay already thick upon the grass.

"I trust you are soon going north, out of this?" he said to her presently. "I just long to hear of you in Scotland!"

"I hope we shall soon go. But—Alec has some business that keeps him."

"Do you mind if I guess what it is?"

She looked at him doubtfully—startled—and uncertain what to say. Alec had convinced her at last, by much assertion, that the *coup* he was attempting, against her advice, was a matter entirely for one man's decision—Sir Lawrence Penwenack's—and that neither Washington nor Robert Llewellyn would know anything at all about it. Otherwise she would never have asked

Llewellyn to dine with her on this evening of suspense—driven by her vague desire for his strong friendly presence. And now she was alarmed.

"I can't help your guessing!" she tried for a light tone. "But it's nothing that matters. We shall soon get away."

His heart was sore for her. He groped on under its guidance.

"Don't think me intruding. But I not only guess—I *know* what it is. And I want to say a word, as your friend—and his."

He heard the quickening of her breath.

"I don't understand——"

"I hear from Washington"—he went on steadily—"that Lord Wing has offered a large sum to the party Whips for the party expenses—and that Alec has written to the Whips asking them to recommend him for the North Brookshire vacancy."

"And—why shouldn't they?" she asked coldly, after a moment. "Alec wants a seat. Lord Wing wants to help the party."

"It is impossible for us to give Alec a seat—just yet," he said, quietly. "We realise fully his wish to help the party. We wish with all our hearts we could say to him—'Go in, and win.' We know what a help he might be—in so many ways. *But*—it is too early days! Persuade him, dear Mrs. Wing!—persuade him to *wait*—and above all not to try this line of approach again. It will do him harm."

He felt, though he could not see, the rush of colour to her cheeks.

"Then he has been refused? Mr. Washington has interfered?"

The voice was low and excited.

"It was absolutely necessary to consult him; though

as a rule, he leaves the party funds to others. And now—forgive me if I speak plainly—for Alec's sake—and yours—no less than ours. We cannot do what he wishes about this seat. And that being so, we shall of course understand that Lord Wing withdraws his offer. For Wing to fight a contested election yet—this year—would provoke an opposition—an odious opposition—from which your friends could not save you. And we *are* your friends, dear Mrs. Wing! Believe it! Washington and I would do anything we could, anything in the world, to shield you from distress and attack. But this course would only provoke it; even if we could consent—which we can't—for the party's sake."

She could hardly restrain herself till his words dropped, before she broke out in a white heat of scorn and resentment.

"*Distress!—attack!* Do you suppose people want any provocation to attack us?—Alec and me! They are always attacking us. As if your keeping Alec out of Parliament would prevent it! I have a dozen anonymous letters a week—disgraceful!—abominable!"

Her choked voice failed her. He longed to comfort her, and felt himself dumb and helpless. They moved on in silence. At last she said—

"Did Mr. Washington ask you to tell me this?"

"We didn't want you to have no answer—but Penwenack's letter," he said gently. "We wanted you to know, he and I, how much we felt for *you*—and how earnestly we hope that—with time—Wing will get his chance of return. But he must do good work—good public work—and earn it."

"For *me!*—what's the use of feeling for me!" she cried. "What do I matter! It is only Alec that matters!"

Silence for a moment. Then she broke out again—

“When one thinks of the hateful hypocrisy of it all—and the *lies*! They say I murdered Dicky—my boy—whom I adored——”

“Dear Mrs. Wing!”—he turned to her in deep distress—“don’t let’s talk any more——”

“Yes—let me talk! You must! You say, Alec can’t stand for Parliament because people would attack his character—and mine—and to adopt him would disgrace the party. And all the time I know—we know—what we suffered—and that we have never told our story—not with any chance of making people believe it!—against John’s. Do *you* think I deserted my child, knowing he was dying?” She turned upon him with passion.

“I am sure you did no such thing!” he said with energy. “You don’t need to convince me.”

“Yes—but you must listen! You must hear the story! You and Mr. Washington have been discussing us—you have been told what everybody says about us—what everybody believes—Well, it *isn’t true*! *This* is what happened!”

A garden seat was near them, and she dropped upon it, pressing her hands to her eyes. He stood near her, in great distress, trying again to stop the confession on her lips. But it would not be stopped.

“Oh, don’t think I’m going to make excuses—to ask anybody’s pardon—for falling in love with Alec! Please don’t imagine that! I was miserable—I had come to hating my husband. I should have killed myself if it had gone on. Then Alec came—and he changed the whole world for me. And I was just his—and he mine. No good talking about it! We had a right to be happy! Don’t you believe that?”

She fiercely challenged him. He made a little sad

gesture, as though putting her question gently aside; and she went on—

“Well, then there were the children. I knew they would take Carina from me. But I thought the baby would be left with me. Anyway I determined to keep him if I could. When Sir John left us at Florence—it all came to a crisis between Alec and me. We lost our heads”—she turned away her face, speaking in a hard, clear voice—“and it was only a question of when I should tell Sir John—and what to do. Dicky had a cold, just a trifling cold. He was a very strong, healthy child and I thought nothing of it. He had an Italian nurse, who had brought him up from a baby—he was born in Rome—and was devoted to him. The doctor said he wanted a change to the hills; it was May, and it had suddenly got very hot. So I told everybody that I was sending him and the nurse to Vallombrosa. But instead, Alec and I took them to a little village in the Val d’Aosta, and told nobody. And then—we went off together to a villa in the Apennines behind Spezia. Carina was left in Florence with her English governess, a woman who hated me, and had been spying upon us for weeks—though I didn’t know. And she found out that Alec and I were together; and she found out where Dicky was. She wrote to Sir John—and he came rushing back to Italy. Meanwhile I went on telegraphing to the nurse in the Val d’Aosta almost every day. Dicky was all right she said—just a little cold—nothing more. And then no answer came to my telegrams—and I got alarmed. But Alec laughed at me. He said the child *must* be all right—only the nurse didn’t want to spend francs for nothing. If he were worse she would of course have telegraphed; but instead she had written; and it was only that our posts up there in the hills were often irregular.

They *were* irregular—we had often complained. So we waited—three days. . . .”

Her voice failed her. She began mechanically to fold and unfold her handkerchief, and through the darkness Llewellyn perceived the desperate agitation that she held in check. But she mastered it completely, and the rest of the story she told quite calmly.

—“Then I made Alec take me back to the Val d’Aosta. We went without stopping, and we took a motor at Ivrea to the village, which was twenty miles up the valley. I found the little house, and knocked at the door—it was ten o’clock at night. And John opened it. Then—oh, it was very awful!—John told me I was a wicked, cruel woman—that I had left Dicky when he was ill—that he was dying of septic pneumonia—would probably die that night—and that I should not see him. I went on my knees to him—but he and his brother Henry refused to let me enter the house. Alec came up and there was a terrible scene. They brought the doctor out, and he told me that I was disturbing the child’s last moments, and all I could do was to go away and let him die peacefully. Then they got me away somehow. There were two English ladies in a little hotel near. They took care of me that night. I wanted to kill myself—and I wouldn’t see Alec. And next morning—Dicky was dead—and Alec came for me. I was very ill—and he took me away—”

There was a long pause. Then Llewellyn enclosed her hand in his, and raised it to his lips.

She drew it away, and dashed the tears from her eyes.

“But you know—I *did*—wait three days!” She half whispered it, as though it were dragged from her. “Alec didn’t *quite* persuade me—I wasn’t *quite* happy. That’s all the truth there is in it. . . .”

In the quiet, poignant words, he seemed to hear the ultimate verdict of her conscience; to perceive the mixed truth—as it appeared to her—and as it still tormented her. She went on—

“But John told everybody his story, and I could never tell mine—till at the trial—our lawyers protested. But nobody believed us—nobody ever has—except those two Englishwomen. I told everything to them—that night they took me in. But then Alec wouldn’t let me keep up with them—and we lost sight of them. He said I *must* forget it all—everything connected with it. I knew it was best—and I have tried hard . . . It wasn’t my fault!” she broke out—“it *wasn’t* my fault. Oh, my Dicky, my Dicky!”—And again she pressed her hands to her eyes.

Llewellyn felt himself in the presence of something as irrevocable and as far-reaching as any Greek doom. On this woman’s nature, in spite of all her passion of self-defence, the death of her child had never ceased to work, and would probably go on working, through all the penetrative and transforming processes of the moral life. That she could feel it so, was to his own ethical sense a proof of a certain greatness in her. “*Can a woman forget her child?*” The prophetic words flashed into memory. This woman, at least, was still tortured, after two years of passionate happiness with her lover, by the charge that she *had* forgotten the little helpless thing; still more by the bitter infinitesimal grain of truth in it that could not be denied.

But the woman who can carry such a thorn about with her, of her own free will, pressing it into her flesh, as it were, in penance, is of no common sort. Behind all the noise and glitter of her great adventure, he found himself realising the true Caroline Wing; and with a profound and painful sympathy. Her wealth, her



beauty, her social triumphs—these were not going to satisfy her! And the man who had captured her—how long would *he* content her?

Gradually he was able to soothe her, and to transform her outburst, and his pity, into a talk of intimates; one of those conversations which are among the landmarks of life. There was very little in it of herself. Alec was her whole preoccupation. Llewellyn divined—indignantly—the terror that she felt of her husband's disappointment, and its possible consequences. Was she afraid that his inability to force his way, the shock it involved to conceit and self-importance, and to the headlong will of "a young man in a hurry," would recoil upon her—and presently detach him from her?

As to herself, and the judgment of this new and true friend on the catastrophe of her first marriage—apart from the death of her child—she carefully, and with dignity, refrained to the end from inviting it. She felt that, in the matter of her child, she was acquitted; and she was prepared to stand upon her own responsibility—as against any outside judgment—for the rest. And if there was one Christian precept more than another which commended itself to the philosopher Llewellyn, it was—"Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned!" Life, and the discipline of life, he thought, must deal with such breaches of law, in the individual. Personally, he refused altogether to play the policeman. But the law itself is the expression of man's self-defence against tyrannous instincts which are always threatening to undermine his partial, spiritual victory. So that this thinker of subtle perceptions, of tender feeling and ascetic ideals, could sympathise both with the woman who had defied the social law, and in a hidden,

remoter, but still resolute way, with those who upheld it.

At the end of their talk she rose and gave him her hand, with a touching word or two of gratitude, and they walked back to the house. As they approached it, a servant brought out a telegram. Caroline read it, and could not conceal her relief.

"Alec has had splendid golf. He sleeps at Sandwich, and will be back to-morrow morning."

So she would not have to grapple with the golden youth and his anger till the morning. Remembering her pale and worn looks, under the lights of the hall, Llewellyn found considerable comfort in this reflection, as he walked home through the empty streets.

## CHAPTER IX

THE morning after her conversation with Llewellyn, Caroline Wing, after a restless night, woke under a sense of bitter depression, of which her thoughts as they grew active soon discovered the reasons. Yet there she lay, in the beautiful room which Lord Wing had furnished with such refinement of costly design for his son's wife; while the deep surrounding quiet of the house and garden, here in the heart of London, suggested a multitude of unseen persons waiting upon the wishes—the caprices—of their mistress, and careful not to let a sound disturb her till she chose to wake.

And the subject of all this luxury, the envied of innumerable women, was only conscious in this August dawn of a shrinking dread not essentially different, after all, from the fear of the docker's wife, who knows that when her husband returns drunk from the football match on which he has betted and lost, she may expect a "knocking about." That Alec's whole present temper and outlook would be vitally affected by this refusal of the party Whips to lift a finger in his aid, Alec's wife was certain. How curt that refusal would have been but for the personal friendship felt for herself by two of the party leaders, she rather dismally guessed. She tried feverishly to plan for the future. How could she now content and soothe him? Would he soon begin to think of her as the person who had spoilt

his life,—soon be impatiently asking whether the game had been worth it? Instinctively, she had become aware of certain mean or disloyal possibilities in his character, which had been absolutely hidden from her through all the love-dream of Italy. Her inmost mind even put the question—half in dread, half in mockery of herself—“will he tell me some day I tempted him! I was the treacherous Eve—and he—my poor Alec—just an innocent unwilling Adam?”

Then, as she lay high on her embroidered pillows, her black hair loose about her white brows, and the rosy colour rushing into her cheeks, like the princess in Grimm's fairy tale when the poisoned fruit drops out of her mouth, the scenes of their love-making ran before her mind; a veritable pageant of Youth and Desire. Alec at her side under Vallombrosa woods—Alec at her feet in some old Italian garden—Alec rowing her on Maggiore, under the moonlight,—his eyes upon her face, the boat drifting on the still water—while the thoughts of both were breathless under the memory or hours that had been, and the eager vision of those that were to come. Her breath failed her now, her life seemed to faint within her once more—as she re-lived that utter delight that is so near to pain; delight in a voice, a look, a touch of a hand, the sound of a step; when passion is young. Yes, everything that passion promises to man and woman had been theirs; except, indeed, innocence, and “silly sooth,” such as may enrich any foolish youth and maid who fall stupidly in love and marry. But to compare their love with any other! That was always her half-realised cry to herself—“We were not like others!—there was no law for us—there could be none! What we felt made its own law. Those who judge us, and would like to

punish us, are like blind men who would punish those with eyes, for seeing."

And in that exalted mood, and that defiant freedom of conscience, she had practically lived until their return home. By that return, they had come back from fairy-land into common life. And instantly, almost, she had become aware of motives and interests in Alec that she had scarcely dreamed of before. She had thought herself all his world. And within the first weeks of their home-coming, the real man, with his tough, inherited traditions, the Englishman, of a certain class and type, of whom the lover was but a phase and part, had emerged solidly into light; and she had been painfully learning her new lesson ever since.

She softly stepped out of bed and drew the curtains. A hot and misty world outside—the dead leaves strewn on the burnt grass—a veiled sky.

And, she thought just for a moment—with a pang—how often love ends so—"like the summer—in a slow dry death."

Then she laughed at herself. "Ah! but not for Alec and me—not for us!" Not for those who have lived heart in heart, life in life, day and night through the heights and depths of a great passion? But can a great passion—a real "great passion"—even conceive its own decline? And she knew well that Alec already loved her less absorbingly; that his mind was rushing to other things that he desired as much as the things of love; things that she could not give him, and must suffer for—because she could not give them to him.

"The best is gone—is gone!" she said to herself with a great sigh of confession, clasping her hands above her head; and, for a moment, it seemed to comfort her to be looking, without excuses or make-believe, into a great darkness.

But she did not really believe it; and her state of depression presently reminded her of the famous cry of *Mélisande*—“*I-am-not-happy!*”—and how, as a girl who despised sentimentality, she had always mocked it. And now it had come to have a queer representative truth in her ears; as the tormented cry of all passion when its first flowering time is over. Must the best of everything always pass?—always die?

She went back to bed, and quietly asked herself—“What shall I do if Alec ever gives up loving me? I shall have no one—no one in the world. Perhaps when she is grown up, Carina will come back to me—ten years hence.”

She turned her head, and there on the table beside her bed was the photograph of her little girl; a slim and graceful creature holding herself like a bird poised for flight; with the deepest blue eyes, and the slenderest neck; an expression sweet yet full of fire—intent, thoughtful, proud—a look beyond her years.

The look of a motherless child! Carrie’s heart hungered for her. Tears streamed over her cheeks quietly—unheeded. On their way north, in a few days, she was to be allowed to see Carina. She and Joyce were to stop for the night at an hotel in Oxford, and the child would be brought to the hotel—for twenty-four hours. And then no more—for a year.

Suddenly through the quiet of the house, she became aware of the sound of a distant door opening and shutting. Joyce?—going to early service? Bells were ringing far away, from all sides; a confused and plaintive clamour through the summer air. Joyce always went to early Communion on Sundays, wherever they were. “And I can never go with her,” thought Carrie. “There are many clergymen, of course, who would refuse to give me Communion if I did go.”

A fierce gust of wounded pride swept through her at the thought. Narrow and insolent fanatics!

But the sound of the bells flowed on, and she found herself following Joyce in thought through the morning streets to some quiet church, fragrant with flowers, and scantily filled with kneeling figures. Just because it was to her a closed and forbidden scene, Carrie was conscious of a bitter wish to be there beside her cousin, within touch of the old spiritual joy, the ineffable self-surrender she could remember in her youth. So Christianity had nothing for her any more?—because she loved Alec?—because she had wrenched herself free from the man she hated, to give herself, honestly, to the man she adored?

So much the worse for Christianity!—for things outworn and dead. The old revolt awoke in her, the fever, the arrogant will of those Italian days. She and Alec—and others like them—were the pioneers of a new freedom; and they would achieve it in spite of priests. It was the bigotry, the Pharisaism of John Marsworth, the tyranny of his conscience and his creed over hers, which had first driven her into rebellion. Was she to be tamely capitulating now, humbling herself before standards her intelligence denied and rejected, because Joyce—her cousin Joyce—was a dear pure-souled thing, who went ardently, yet so silently, every Sunday morning, through the great house, to that mystic meeting of the altar?

Eight o'clock! In the quiet of the Sunday morning, even in this vast London, the strokes of Big Ben came borne to her, muffled, on the southerly wind. Alec would be home by luncheon, and then the task of pacifying and cheering him would begin. And after luncheon, no doubt,—when she had done all the comforting she could—he would go and complain to Mrs.

Whitton. Why was that woman still in town? Because Alec was? It was hateful that she should have anything to do with Alec's affairs—that she should be “taking him up”—that Alec should owe anything to her—or any other woman than his wife. Carrie's proud jealousy was in full flood. She thought with joy that they could go off to Scotland now, without waiting another day, that Alec's weeks immediately ahead were very full of sporting engagements with many friends, and that Mrs. Whitton would naturally drop out of his ken—for a time. Carrie could even find a miserable consolation for the failure of Alec's scheme—if it was to fail—in the fact that Mrs. Whitton, who no doubt had been pulling wires in connection with it, had not been able to make it succeed! For there was something in Madge Whitton's personality which had by now roused a hot antagonism in the mistress of Eltham House.

“When we meet, she turns me into a snob!” thought Carrie. “I want to lord it over her—to put her down—to make her feel that we are great people, and she nobody. And she, on her side, seems to be always mocking—or patronising—or pitying me. It is as though she were always looking out for a chance of reminding me of how we are boycotted—of what people think of us; and all the time she never says a single direct word on the subject. Yet, what a fool I am! If I played my cards properly I should ask her here constantly. I should keep her in sight. I should never let her dream that I was afraid of her. But to see her and Alec together!—how she appropriates and cajoles him—it is too odious! And he, poor darling, he means nothing, of course; and he is half shocked and half amused by my feeling about her. All the time, if she could do me a mischief, she



would. That absurd thing Mr. Llewellyn said to me! very likely she started it!"

She lay and thought of the "absurd thing," resenting it—and yet troubled by it. During their long talk, when she had begun to realise in the party politician, Robert Llewellyn, that strange pastoral gift that so many pastors and priests are without, he had ventured the very gentlest hint on the subject of Lord Melton. She pondered it unhappily. Had she really been seeing too much of the young man? Ridiculous! All the same, she thought with some discomfort of the phrases and expressions of a letter now lying beside her in a little bundle of recent letters. Lord Melton belonged to one of the most famous families of England; famous for its virtues even more than its accomplishments; fruitful in bishops no less than in statesmen. He was the pink of conduct—the "mould of form." All sorts of fair ladies, of the most spotless reputations, had laid siege to him in vain; and, in her precarious position, Carrie had been far from insensible to the compliment of his devotion. No woman, however deeply in love with her husband, could help being flattered by it. Carrie had certainly been flattered—touched—grateful. But if people like Mrs. Whitton were going to spread scandal about it; if even Mr. Llewellyn were to misunderstand it; and if Alec could not be argued out of the unreasonable dislike he had taken to the young man—why, the young man must go! "What does he matter to me?" thought Carrie with a proud bitterness. Nothing mattered, but Alec—nothing in the world. She fell again into a tender absorption of thought as to his future; how to help him—how to devise work for him which would bring him success and fame, and silence all their enemies.

"Good morning! How cool you are here!" said Joyce Allen, settling herself on the grass at Carrie's feet. She had seen nothing of her cousin that morning, and now after matins she had returned to find Carrie established under an awning on the great lawn, with books and newspapers beside her.

"And how fresh you look—in your black and white!" said Carrie, holding out a hand which the girl took and pressed affectionately. And certainly Joyce was pleasant to look upon, though in her quiet pale face nothing held its own against the brilliance of her cousin's beauty, except perhaps the eyes which were of a bright and delicate blue, fringed and eyebrowed with black. She gave you the impression of a person of great reserves; and these all good, all to be trusted. A person, too, born without the personal claim which makes both the weakness and the charm of most women. In exchange, Nature had given her powers of sympathy that vibrated to any need which happened to be near her. So that while absurdly unselfish, she was defencelessly human, and by the time you had discovered the saint in her, you had learnt to love her for so much else that it did not matter.

Caroline had already come to depend upon her greatly. The mere business correspondence of the huge house was a burden, apart from its social correspondence. Carrie was unpunctual, untidy, with a mind full, first of all, of Alec, then of politics, then of some daring social combination or other which might help Alec. She hated drudgery, and she hated accounts; she was generous, quite unspoilt by money, and extravagant out of mere impatience. Joyce, it seemed, had a practical mind, and untiring industry. Carrie was gradually heaping more and more responsibility upon her; the girl reluctantly accepting.

Carrie had herself planned the black and white dress, and looked at it with pleasure, for it certainly did her credit.

"Where have you been?"

"To the Abbey. There was a lovely anthem—by a new man."

She began to describe it with enthusiasm and the phrases of one who had been musically trained.

But in the midst of her description, she suddenly noticed that Carrie had taken up from the chair on which it was lying a small worn Bible, which Joyce had brought back with her from service. A sudden look of alarm flashed into the girl's eyes; she bit her lip, and stumbled in what she was saying. Rising, she held out her hand for the book:

"I must go in and get ready for lunch."

But Carrie was already turning the book over. She raised her eyes.

"You don't mind, do you, my looking at these photographs?"

The tone was kind and careless. But Joyce had turned white.

A cry from Caroline.

"Joyce!" She had risen to her feet, holding out the book. A photograph—a "snap"—had fluttered to the grass. Joyce picked it up, and stood hanging her head.

"Who is it?" asked Caroline, breathlessly.

"My aunt—my mother's sister," said Joyce, her timid eyes on the ground.

"Your aunt? Where is she?—did she ever mention me to you?"

The voice was peremptory—the breath fluttered.

"Yes."

"Is she alive?"

"No. She died last winter. She told father—and me——"

"About Dicky's death?" said Caroline, panting.

The girl made a sign of assent. There was a silence. Then Caroline handed back the book, and resumed her seat, her face pale and stormy.

"So you know all that—and you never said a word!" The tears rushed to Joyce's eyes.

"How could I?" she said, gently.

"Was that—was that what made you come—when I asked you?"

"Yes."

Caroline fell back in her chair, and closed her eyes, her lips quivering. Joyce looked at her irresolutely—then with a sudden movement came and knelt beside her.

"It was one day last year. Aunt Agnes was staying with us, and father was very ill. We saw the announcement of your marriage in the paper—and father said something——"

The young voice wavered, and resumed—

"He felt very strongly—about divorce—and divorced people marrying again. So it—was natural. He—he didn't mean to be unkind. And—he had heard something about Dicky. And then Aunt Agnes looked at him and me, and we saw that she was crying—and she said—'Edward, I know a great deal about Mrs. Wing. I was with her through a very terrible night. I should like to tell you and Joyce, because she is our cousin, and Joyce perhaps will see her some day—and get to know her—and hear things said of her. And about the little boy—and the worst things that are said—I can tell you the real truth. I was never so sorry—for any human being, in my life!'"

"And then she told you——?"

"Yes——"

"How she took me in—she and her friend? Is the friend alive?" The questions were low-spoken, and though Carrie had taken the girl's hand, the eyes were still shut.

"Miss Nelson? Oh, yes."

After another pause Caroline said—

"I had no idea she had any connection with my family. We never gave our names that night. Next morning—after Dicky died—I was hardly conscious—Alec took me away. Then somehow I heard the name—Miss Penrose—Miss Agnes Penrose. But it conveyed nothing to me. I didn't know your mother's maiden name, and I hadn't seen your father since I was a child of twelve or thirteen."

"But he always remembered you!" said Joyce eagerly, venturing to kiss the hand she held. "He said you were—so beautiful!—in the old college rooms; like a young Muse. He always kept up his classics; and there were some passages he loved—Greek poetry—that seemed to him to describe you. There was one about Nausicaa—'like a tall poplar tree——' I forget! But he translated some of them for me, and gave them to me—after Aunt Agnes told us—that I might know what he had felt about you."

By this time Carrie had recovered her composure, and that proud bearing which was habitual to her. She raised herself in her chair, and Joyce slid into a sitting posture on the grass, her face against Carrie's knees.

"So Cousin William gave you leave to come?" she asked, in a still tremulous but slightly sarcastic voice.

"Before he died—if you should ever ask me," said Joyce, softly, her face hidden.

"Because he was sorry for me about Dicky? He thought me wicked, of course!"

"He was—very sorry—" said the girl, almost inaudibly.

Caroline divined that there was much more to know. But she did not intend to ask for it. The thin ascetic face of the old college vicar, as she remembered seeing him several times in her childhood, in her father's study, was sharply present to her.

"Would you have come—if I hadn't written to you—would you have written to me?"—she inquired rather sharply.

"I—don't know. I should have been too shy—perhaps!" said Joyce, looking up with a smile, and trying to give the conversation a lighter turn.

"I have no doubt many of our relations tried to dissuade you."

Mrs. Wing named some of them, but carelessly, as though their names could not possibly matter.

"I am twenty-three," said Joyce quietly.

Both speakers fell silent. But Carrie was full of tumultuous thought. So this delicate, maidenly creature had accepted her invitation, out of pure pity, anxious only to serve her; sent by that dead saint her father. The sin waived—only the suffering remembered! "Neither do I condemn thee—go and sin no more." The proud tears flashed again into Carrie's eyes. And again she rebelled—fiercely—against this weak susceptibility in herself to the old Christian ideas and traditions. Perhaps after all it was a Christian plot of these two pious people, the one dead, the other living, to bring her to her senses. She rose, saying with a cold dignity—

"I wish you had told me all this before."

And she went slowly into the house, while Joyce,

looking after the queenly figure, became very red and bit her lip furiously. Had she, after all, made a foolish—perhaps unpardonable—mistake?

“Good morning! This is astonishing!—to find you all still here!”

Joyce looked up startled. Captain Durrant was coming to her across the lawn—very tall and soldierly—his young countenance expressive of an unconcealed pleasure at the sight of Miss Allen, alone. But he was not long to enjoy it. Joyce gave him the most perfunctory of greetings, and with a hurried excuse, went into the house, leaving him to walk about disconsolately till lunch. Where had they all vanished to? And why had Miss Allen been crying—or something near it? Had Carrie perhaps been unkind to her?—for that Carrie had lately been on the lawn, her wraps and books scattered under the awning showed. The notion raised a momentary storm in the young man’s breast. Then he dismissed it. Carrie unkind to her? Why, she had been goodness itself to her orphan cousin! Durrant was well aware of all the domestic detail of the preceding weeks since Joyce’s arrival; and the result had been to make him more than ever Caroline’s apologist and champion. For he was rapidly coming to measure all that befell him by one standard only—how he could possibly secure a good time for Miss Joyce Allen:—and, in return, a due payment in smiles from that young woman’s very soft, and most attaching eyes.

Alec had not returned by luncheon-time. But a few *habitués* appeared; either stranded in London for various official reasons, or birds of passage. The Duchess, for instance—on her way from a castle in Devon to a castle in Perthshire; the French Ambassador, without his wife, who was at Vernet-les-Bains; the permanent

Secretary of one of the great offices; Sir Oliver Lewson, and an M.P. or two, wearily expecting the adjournment of the House.

At luncheon, and on the lawn afterwards, Carrie was at her best and gayest. She got through a great many cigarettes, she chattered French with the Ambassador, who sat for an hour and more, openly and undisguisedly worshipping at her shrine, as he would never have dared to do had not his wife's *migraines* driven her to the Pyrenees. She sparred with the Duchess. And no one guessed that on her passage through the hall, she had seen a large official-looking letter addressed to Alec, bearing in the corner of it the initials L.P.; nor did anyone notice that every sound from the garden entrance of the house made her start and look round.

The Duchess—strangely garbed on this hot summer day, in a heather-mixture coat and skirt, with a tweed travelling hat of the same material—was describing some very great people with whom she had just been staying on her triumphal progress through the south-west. The wife "dreadfully stupid, but you can't help liking her—she flounders, more than she errs! The husband, a big jealous fool, jealous of everybody, his wife, his agent, his son even, because the youth shoots better than he does; and they say last year, when they stayed at Zermatt, he was jealous of the Matterhorn, because every morning people asked—'How's the Matterhorn to-day?'—and it annoyed him."

"It's that national self-importance saves you," laughed the Ambassador. "If you didn't believe in yourselves——"

"Who would believe in us? Yes—but we over-do it. Our class—*my* class"—she pointed calmly to herself—"don't recognise what's happened to them. They're so 'damned surly about facts'—excuse my



language!—as somebody said of Fox. You can't persuade 'em. But their day's done. And they still go on—some of them—still imagining they're the hub of things, and the universe waits on them. You know Alec's a deal too much like that," said the terrible lady, composedly turning to Carrie who sat near her. Carrie flushed.

"That's not fair!" she said, rather indignantly. "Alec's not here to defend himself."

"No—but he soon will be. You say you expect him directly. I'll return to the charge. Wing—his father—is another of them. He can't get his way now, as he used to do; on his estates, or in Parliament. So he won't play the game any more; shuts himself up; goes out shooting alone with an army of keepers and beaters; and despises everybody. But what's the good? Can I make a scullery-maid stay with me now if she doesn't choose? Not I. She and the hall-boy have got the whip hand of me, and they know it. We talk—or if we don't talk, we think—of our money and our pedigrees; and the other sort don't talk—but they've got the numbers and the brains—and that's enough for them!"

"Monstrous!" said Sir Oliver. "Why attack us like this? We're all Liberals here!" The Duchess shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm a Liberal—when it suits me—not otherwise. Ah! here's Alec!"

Caroline half rose from her chair, and sank into it again. The tall figure of Alec Wing came slowly down the garden steps. The Ambassador, waving a welcoming hand, turned to look at the splendid young Englishman—his curly hair, his shoulders, the slim strength of his athlete's body. So did Oliver Lewson, who was struck however by something else; as though the handsome face had been suddenly blanched. The owner

of it held a letter crushed in his left hand, which he put into his coat pocket as he approached the group. He greeted them all however as usual, except that—as the Duchess noticed—he scarcely spoke to his wife. Carrie, on her side, made a smiling inquiry after his fortunes at golf, which remained almost unanswered. The Duchess resumed her attack on the still surviving *ἱβρις* of the poor battered British nobility, but Wing rather scornfully put her shafts aside, and plunged into golf-talk with one or two of the men present.

Somehow his coming broke up the party. Carrie's talk ceased to flow; everyone was conscious of something wrong; and one by one the guests melted away, till only the husband and wife—and the Duchess—were left.

When Alec came back from escorting the Ambassador through the house, the Duchess fixed him with fearless eye.

"Alec!—are you going to jump down my throat if I make a remark that doesn't please you?"

"Isn't it too hot to do either?" he said, haughtily, stretching himself at full length in a garden chair, and drawing down his hat over his eyes.

"Well, I happen to know what you've been after," said the Duchess calmly. "I found Penwenack down at Merstham—" she named the latest castle on her list—"he's an old friend of mine, and I can get most things out of him. He didn't tell me much—but enough. Really, Alec! now don't be angry with me—but you have put your foot in it!"

Alec sat up. Carrie outwardly impassive, watched him, shrinking at heart. How strange that she could not even put out a hand to him! It was as though some baffled force, at a white heat of friction, held the man she loved, dividing her from him. The Duchess too quailed a little.

"My dear Aunt Emily—let me point out to you that I am not a schoolboy any longer—to be either scolded or tipped by you—though I fully admit you used to do both magnificently ten years ago. And if you wish to remain friends with Carrie and me, you won't gossip about my private affairs with Penwenack or anybody else!"

The Duchess had turned a little pale. But she rose with dignity. Her old eyes were full of softness and compunction.

"I seem to have made a fool of myself. Well, good-bye, Carrie. I didn't mean any harm. Alec, you'd get through all your troubles if you'd be content to go slow. But you always would rush at things head down. Good-bye—don't bother about seeing me out."

But Wing ceremoniously escorted her to the door and bowed her to her car. Then he slowly returned to his wife.

"Well, Carrie," he said sitting down beside her, "don't worry!"

But his eyes were singularly sombre, and the brow above them furrowed.

"Darling!" she said piteously, holding out her hands to him.

"You seem to know all about it," he said bitterly.

"Mr. Llewellyn came last night."

"Oh well——" he spoke hastily—"I don't the least want to know what he said! Lots of good advice, no doubt. I'm not in the mood for it. But I'll be even with them all some day! And now I'm going out a bit. I shall be back for dinner." He rose as he spoke. Carrie's cheeks flamed.

"Alec! you're not going away!—without letting us talk it over? And mayn't I see the letter?"

"Penwenack's? What's the good? Canting

hypocrisy like all the rest of it. Well, that chapter's closed. Don't let's talk any more of it. I shall get my chance some day. Good-bye for the present. Shall I find you a wrap? It's getting cold."

He rose as he spoke. And she rose too.

"Alec!—why can't you stay? I haven't seen you since yesterday morning—and I've been thinking of you all day and all night. Alec!—don't be so unkind!"

"We shall meet to-night," he said, moving away.

"But where are you going now? Why are you so strange? Is it any fault of mine what has happened? Haven't I done everything——" her voice broke, and she regained it with difficulty—"everything I possibly could?"

"Yes, of course you have!" His manner was one of sombre impatience. "But for goodness' sake, Carrie, don't make a scene. I hate scenes. I must go."

She paused a moment. A throb of sudden passion ran through her from head to foot. She drew away.

"You are going to that woman—to Mrs. Whitton! You won't talk it over with me—your wife—but you will with her! It's an insult to me, Alec,—you know it is!"

"Why shouldn't I talk it over, with any friend I please!" he said, with an answering flash of wrath, but coldly restrained. "We shall have time enough, you and I, God knows, to discuss what I'm to do with myself, and my future. You're a goose, Carrie—you really are—to behave like this!"

And without another word he walked away; while she, as he finally disappeared, felt her way blindly to the deep shelter of a close-set avenue of limes which ran along the eastern edge of the garden, and dropped upon a seat, as though the words hurled at her had been daggers indeed.

And there, screened from all eyes, but within hail of the magnificent house which called her mistress, Caroline Wing went through one of the blackest hours of life. Hers had been no mercenary bargain, whatever the public hostile to her might think. She had given her all for Love, as she understood it, and she seemed already to hear the rustle of his departing wings along the darkened air.

## CHAPTER X

**B**UT life has a way of dealing disrespectfully with its own crises. It huddles them up and effaces them as soon as it can. The wave, crested and foaming, which looked so formidably high to the weak swimmer, carries him into seas gentler than his fears; and the demand for a tragic endurance, to which a torn heart braces itself in the morning, drops by the evening to something very different, though perhaps not less difficult.

Alec Wing returned to dinner that evening, bringing with him a couple of casual club acquaintances; and the guests at any rate served the purpose, which Caroline at once suspected, of preventing any immediate renewal of the scene between them. A few other *habitués* of the house turned up; the chef, whose huge salary was largely paid him on condition that he was at all times equally ready for two or twenty, performed brilliantly, and the easy perfection of the Eltham House entertaining was once more proved even in this deserted London. Wing himself was apparently in high spirits, as shown by much talk, and the drinking of more wine than usual. Every now and then indeed he had sudden relapses into silence, his prominent eyes staring absently before him, which betrayed him to Caroline. He was pale too, still, and Carrie found herself watching him at intervals as though some novelty in his bearing, something at once lost and discovered arrested her.

Homer says of the garden of 'Alcinous—"On one side the ripe grapes were drying in the sun; on another the young clusters were just dropping their blossom; on a third the bunches were beginning to colour." Wing's youth, like the grape-flower, was just dropping its blossom; and the human plant knows no second spring. It was some faint desolating perception of this which stirred intermittently in Caroline as she noticed her husband's imperious bearing, on this summer evening to which both afterwards looked back with eyes cleared by distance. For their love for each other had dealt so violently with life, had claimed so much and drunk so deep, that the first check, the first change of atmosphere had produced in the one a sudden hardening, and in the other a shiver of bewildered fear—fear of things unknown. The man—unconsciously—was tired of feeling; and the woman in perceiving it, knew indeed that the first perfect hours were done.

And yet the evening, outwardly, ended much like other evenings. While Alec saw his guests to the hall, Caroline dreading the moment when he and she must be again alone, went to Joyce's room, and stayed there disjointedly talking, till she heard him calling her from the gallery. Then she got up from Joyce's bed on which she had been sitting, and Joyce saw her for a moment draw herself to her full height, as though something in her prepared for testing. She was a glittering vision in the girl's white room; a sash of deep blue, like an order, slung from shoulder to waist, defining the long body in its lace dress, and one sapphire shining, where the white brow and the dark hair met, above the deep-set eyes. To Joyce, she was still a queen of fairy-tale, as beautiful and as mysterious; but since their conversation in the garden the girl knew very well that their relations had changed—perhaps

fundamentally. Carrie had not so far said another word about the discovery of the afternoon, but some proud aloofness had insensibly passed away. The soul in her seemed to be feeling dumbly for Joyce's sympathy; yet still with intervals of withdrawal and flight.

But that night there was no time for any further nearing of each to the other. Caroline hurried back to the gallery, and found Alec pacing up and down it, with his hands in the pocket. He stopped at sight of her—frowning.

"Carrie!—when can we get off?"

"Whenever you like. The servants will take two days to make things comfortable. But I——"

"Yes?" he pressed her impatiently, seeing her hesitate.

"I must go to Oxford—to see Carina."

His face changed.

"Must you? You won't want me?"

"I can take Joyce."

"Yes, that will be capital," he said, with evident relief. "I should be only in the way. I might go to a Perth hotel for two nights, or—perhaps—happy thought!—run down, and look in on Pater. Somebody from Brookshire I came across in the Mall just now, gave me rather a poor account of him."

Caroline was conscious of a stab of pain. Any reference to Carina on her part had never yet failed to bring him to her side, challenged as a lover to make up to her for the children she had lost—through him. For, as tenderness is always to women the better half of passion, it was, strangely enough, through her boy's death, and her exile from Carina, that Caroline had known the most poignant and intimate happiness—however bitter-sweet—that love had brought her. And



now this half-strained, half-indifferent tone, in relation to what had touched her to the quick, was a new suffering. But she said nothing. She came to stand beside him, resting her beautiful head against him, as though to show—mutely—that their quarrel of the afternoon was forgotten. He put his arm round her and kissed her, but he was evidently preoccupied.

"Whom have we asked for Scotland? Are we full up?" She ran through the list, and he exclaimed impatiently at some of the names.

"Of course the men are all right. But it doesn't sound much fun for me, darling. Do you mean to say the wives won't come?" He named a peeress, and a marquis's daughter, married to one of his Eton friends.

"They won't," said Carrie, raising herself and looking him straight in the face, her cheeks burning. "I've done everything."

"But they called?"

"They sent cards by a footman—to please their husbands, I suppose—who have dined here about once a week. Then I wrote—I wrote very nicely—and they wrote—quite correctly—and of course they have engagements—for every possible date. Can't you make up your mind to it, Alec?" She surveyed him quietly.

"And both those women have asked me," he said indignantly. "I have had invites from them both."

"I dare say. That's their line. Oh, Alec, if you'd only believe——"

"Believe what?"

"In waiting. I'm content to wait."

"But that's different!" he said, with energy, guessing rather angrily at her thought. "After all, you can do without those women. But if I am cut off indefinitely from the only career I care for—the only career I am fit for—how can I make up?"

His face flushed again, and he began to walk stormily up and down, thinking aloud.

"A boycott which ruins a man's life is very different from a little social cold-shouldering. It's perfectly *monstrous* the way in which we have let these hypocritical Dissenters, and purity people—these canting women above all—domineer over a man's private affairs! Where's it to end, I should like to know. No!—I'm going to *fight*! I'm going to make this Liberal gang—*Liberals*, indeed!—smart for it. My head's full of plans, Carrie. If this hundred thousand can't be used for one thing it can for another. I shall get Pater to hand it over to me unconditionally, and we'll see. There's an evening paper on the market, and I have my eye on an editor. We can make things pretty hot I think for Washington and his crew—and for your pious friend Llewellyn too!"

The bitterness and malice in his tone struck Carrie with dismay.

"Alec, for goodness' sake let me tell you what Mr. Llewellyn really said to me last night!" she begged him, piteously. And hurriedly she forced her report on Alec's reluctant ears. She said nothing of her confession with regard to Dicky. Instinctively she hid from this splendid youth—half Apollo, half grandee in a temper—pacing before her, all that moral trouble and softening which her talk with Llewellyn had awakened in her. But she laid stress on Llewellyn's friendly kindness—on the advice he had given—on the hopes he had held out. She pleaded, however, in vain with a man for whom the mere crossing of his will was an intolerable humiliation. And very soon she realised that for her to argue and plead at all—instead of throwing herself, at once, passionately and blindly, into his resentment and his plans—was becoming a crime in his

eyes. Dalliance in Italian gardens was all very well—his tone seemed to imply—but there were male affairs in which she was not asked to meddle. Or if she did meddle, it must be only as his docile advocate and champion. Her quick intelligence felt itself once more brushed aside. She could only listen, silenced and unconvinced, to his torrent of angry talk, dismally conscious soon that her silence annoyed him as much as any words.

"Well, there's one woman at any rate that understands the situation!" he said at last. "You go and talk to her, Carrie! She'll tell you a lot of things you don't know. She'll tell you that beyond a certain point, it's no good playing doormat. You've got to make people afraid of you! And I intend to do it."

"You mean Mrs. Whitton?"

"I do. She put new life into me this afternoon," he said defiantly.

Caroline's face had grown rather hard and white. She looked at him askance.

"And you're going to follow her advice—rather than mine, Alec?"

"I'm going to follow my own judgment," he said stubbornly. Then as he turned to look at her, his senses were suddenly appealed to by the loveliness of the drooping form, the slender arms and hands that lay languidly on her knee. He came up to her impetuously, and raised her in a vehement embrace.

"Carrie, my girl, don't you worry and oppose me!—you're mine—come in along with me—trust me—do as I tell you! We'll have a grand time fighting them all—you in your way, and I in mine. Only I'm captain—mind that! Don't you love me, Carrie? Won't you back me, whatever anybody says? You

couldn't love a weakling—and a coward. But you do love me, Carrie!—you know you do!”

He held her triumphantly—and she felt herself mastered. Whatever violence he might plan—against her best friends!—she would have to follow. She clung to him trembling, almost asking for pardon, and he almost exacting it. But she could not restrain the inevitable shaft—

“I won't play second to Mrs. Whitton, Alec!”

He laughed and kissed her again.

“You baby! As if she mattered, except just as a pawn in the game. But I tell you she is a clever woman, and one can pick her brains most profitably. Why don't you do it, Carrie? And as to jealousy, I like your finding fault with me! I don't think I need bother about Llewellyn. But what about that fellow Melton? If ever I saw a man bowled over, it's he. You've got a letter from him there!” He pointed peremptorily to a book inside which, with her usual carelessness, Caroline had been carrying Melton's letter all day.

She drew herself away from him, flushing deeply.

Taking up the letter, she held it out to him.

“Read it! I like him, Alec—and he likes me.”

“So I have long perceived. Well, as you say I may, I think I will read it. Anything I write to Mrs. Whitton might be cried on the house-tops.”

She said nothing. He read the letter, and put it down with a smile in which, however, there was some bitterness.

“He seems a sentimental kind of beggar. I never can understand the tone these men friends of yours take up—Carrie! It isn't at all complimentary to me! You said once Llewellyn was ‘so sorry for us.’ Why should he be? It's like his impertinence. And that

man's letter——" he pointed to it—"I don't know—it's very queer. He talks—somehow—as though he were St. George, offering to save you from the dragon. What's wrong? Who's the dragon? Much obliged to him—but I decline the part for myself. And if there is any dragon, it's *my* business to settle him—not Melton's. Don't you let yourself be pitied, Carrie! That man'll be making love to you before you know where you are!"

And he turned to look at her—half hectoring, half laughing. He sat on the arm of an easy chair, dangling his crossed legs, his hands in his pockets. Grace, insolence, the passionate self-confidence of the aristocrat, which scarcely shows till contradiction from the common herd develops it:—the young figure breathed them all. It was the emergence, as the Duchess had shrewdly seen, of something which the democratic modern world believes itself to have done with, and is yet compelled, again and again, to reckon with. This handsome youth was as much convinced of his absolute right to the best of things, to everything he might chance to wish for, as any *seigneur* of the *ancien régime*. Carrie's main danger indeed lay in the fact that their two lives sprang from quite different traditions—hers from the intellectual professional class, sober, scrupulous, and self-controlled—his from a *noblesse* accustomed for generations to command and enjoy.

Caroline met his onslaught with composure.

"The man who makes love to me, Alec, must be a great fool."

"Why?"

"You know why. I am not going to flatter you by saying it."

"You may flirt with Melton, if you like, Carrie."

"That you may have the pleasure of laughing at him? Thank you, I like him too much."

"Well, I give you leave anyway. I'm not in the least afraid. And you won't be afraid either, if I amuse myself a little?" Then his face changed suddenly. "However, I shall have more serious matters to think of this autumn and winter. We shall make things hot for old Washington."

And rising, he flung an arm round her, and made her pace the gallery with him, while he talked excitedly of his plans for the winter—the formation of a new party, the buying or founding of a newspaper, the use of Eltham House as the head-quarters of a policy and a group.

"They won't have me as a friend—very well, they shall reckon with me as an enemy. I can speak, I can write, I can set other people to write and speak. I've got money, and go, and plenty of time. I mean to make it a glorious campaign—and you'll become a very famous woman, Carrie! But I won't have Llewellyn preaching to you. Hullo, what's that?"

For the sound of an electric bell rang loudly through the great empty spaces of the house.

"A telegram;—at this time of night?"

He hurried to the staircase to meet the servant coming up.

"Carrie!"

She came running.

"Pater's ill—very ill! Why didn't the idiots send for me before! This is from the doctors. It looks serious. Harrison!"—he turned to the butler—"let somebody go and ring up one of the chauffeurs, and say I must have a motor at once."

Carrie looked at the message in dismay. "Lord Wing's state has this evening become alarming. Please

come at once. He would not allow us to summon you before." There followed the signatures of two London specialists, and the name of a Sussex village.

Carrie flew to give orders. A sleepy valet was told to pack, and Wing went to change his clothes. When he came back to his wife in travelling dress, Carrie was aware of a strange ardour, even gaiety in his manner.

"Poor Pater!" he said, as they waited in her sitting-room for the announcement of the motor—"I trust it won't be long. He was never meant for a dragging sort of illness. He couldn't stand it. Nor could I. He has enjoyed his life, Carrie! On the whole, for all his oddities, he's had a ripping time, and he knows it. It'll be awfully important—of course—for me."

Carrie looked at him interrogatively. There was sadness in her dark eyes, and in her mind a strong compassion for, and loyalty towards Lord Wing, who had always been her friend, in his strange way. What did Alec mean?

"If I do go to the Lords"—he resumed, thoughtfully—"it will affect all my plans. I shall be in politics—and in Parliament—directly. Do you understand that, darling?—whatever Washington and his prigs may say! By George, it would give me openings!"

He stood thinking—his face working under the energy of his thoughts and desires. Carrie understood, with a secret shiver, that his father's approaching death was, at that moment, to the son on whom that father had lavished every possible gift and indulgence in his power, merely an element in a calculation, a card in his game.

The motor arrived. He turned to his wife.

"I shall be there in less than two hours. If things are very bad, you'd better follow first thing. If there's a change for the better——"

"I should go to Oxford first—for the day," she said quickly, "and then come on. Give him my love."

He threw his arms round her.

"It's all made up—isn't it?" he murmured in his old voice—the voice of her lover.

A sudden gush of tears came to her eyes. She pressed his fair curls back from his forehead, and kissed him passionately. He smiled, and went.

Before eight o'clock next morning, a messenger arrived from Bracebridge, bringing a note. "Pater has rallied wonderfully. No immediate danger, but shall stay on. Expect you Tuesday."

The next morning, Mrs. Wing left Eltham House by motor for Oxford. Everything had been arranged by telephone. Carina would be brought by a maid to the Bishop's Hotel, Oxford, to meet her mother, about mid-day, and the following morning she would be taken back again to her grandmother's house, some twelve miles from the University town.

It was a morning of light mists, broadening into splendid sunshine. Joyce sat by Caroline's side. Caroline had come in to see the girl in bed that morning, and had abruptly asked her to come with her. And Joyce, throwing timid arms round the beautiful creature looking down upon her, had murmured—"How sweet of you to ask me!" Afterwards Caroline had lingered in the girl's embrace, talking under her breath of Carina—and Lord Wing. It was the talk of one seeking blindly for a friend.

Joyce's spirits rose as the motor left London behind, and they were soon speeding through the green country to the foot of the Chilterns at High Wycombe. Up the long hill they rose into the heart of the hills, and so over the little pass whence the main road descends



upon the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire plain. The scent of the woods, the play of the clouds, and the wide beauty of the unrolling northward plain, as they looked down from the crest of Stokenchurch hill, put life into Caroline's eyes, and colour into her cheeks. That haunting sense of something changed, something broken, passed away for the time. Alec and she had kissed again; Lord Wing had rallied; Carina was to be hers, for twenty-four hours, without interruption, and without witnesses. The child would come in a maid's custody; but that night she would sleep in her mother's room, her mother's hands would put her to bed.

Meanwhile her young and starved maternity showed itself in mothering her cousin. Unspoken gratitude, appealing affection breathed from her; so that Joyce found her irresistible. And always the girl felt herself the elder; although Carrie was in truth four years older than Joyce. But there would always remain something of the "imperishable child" in her; something uncertain, confiding, pliant. And it was the mingling of this childish temper, with quick conscience on the one hand, and the daring of her lawless history on the other, which made her spell. Joyce—the little Anglican maiden, brought up under the strictest canons—knew well enough that this magnificent Carrie had sinned grievously—and could not somehow love her one whit the less.

The car sped on over the crest of the Chilterns, and down upon the gracious wooded plain beyond, with its low hills, and its old towns steeped in history. And now came Oxford—Magdalen Bridge, and that tall tower, that seems neither secular nor religious, to belong neither to war nor piety, but to things universal—poetry, beauty, grace. Then the famous curving street, with its ranged colleges, and its crocketed church—

and so to the old inn, which has seen Johnson and Gibbon pass. For Carrie it was a coming-home; her eyes took greedy note of each successive landmark, each familiar spot. For five years or more of her girlhood she had lived in Oxford; the old college, of which her father had been Head, lay in one of the narrow streets opening on the High. She had danced her first dance in Oxford, and had known there two crowded glorious years with troops of young men waiting on her smiles; till suddenly John Marsworth had carried her off. The country house where she had lived with him those eight years was only a few miles away. As the motor carried them through the half-deserted street—for it was of course the middle of the Long Vacation—Caroline's eyes glanced in a bright absorption from side to side—and her mind was full of recollections that half amused, half hurt her. There was the old furniture and curiosity shop where so many of her Oxford friends had bought their wedding presents for Caroline Delaney; there was the church porch where she had first seen John, coming out of University sermon; the turn to Christ Church meadow—

How vividly she saw herself, the slim girl in white, walking beside her fiancé down the Broad Walk, to the boats, proud of his stature and strength—proud to be seen and congratulated. And those long hours of drifting down to Iffley and Nuneham!—the green peace of the backwaters—the foaming white of the weirs—

No—those first pleasant days had not been wholly wiped out in memory, though, in comparison with what life had exacted from nerve and feeling since, they had been but faintly lived. The old Oxford atmosphere stole over her, indeed, with every step along the famous street, inter-penetrated with the fears and hopes and

compunctions of her present existence. She had been happy in those far off years, happy—and good! The history, the ideals, the personalities of the great University city, had made an environment in which a romantic child had been insensibly fashioned to fine issues. She remembered her confirmation; the shy clergyman who had prepared her; her first communion, and all the moral and spiritual fervour which had accompanied it. Her mother was dead by then, and her father had not meant very much to her. He was absorbed in his college business, and in the collection—for his spare moments—of old prints, and pre-Ming china. An ultra-refined, rather selfish man, with irritating parsimonious ways towards servants and dependents, which Carrie soon learnt to notice and resent. But he had been proud of her, and there had been no sparing on her education. A younger sister of her mother had looked after her for a time, but she and Carrie had never got on. "She was jealous of me!" thought Carrie, with a mind suddenly illuminated as she looked back. "I suppose I was handsome!" And she remembered with a pleased vanity what Joyce had reported of her father's impressions of the child—the Muse—of fourteen. How sheltered and innocent and peaceful it all seemed as one looked back upon it!—that past childish scene, set in grey college walls.

Twelve o'clock—chiming from all the steeples and towers of Oxford. Carrie came back suddenly to the present moment. The motor was stopping before the old inn, with its Georgian front and shallow bow windows. Through the open door, one saw panelled passages and stairs—old racing prints and a grandfather's clock. Waiters came running out; and Carrie descended. She went quickly into the hotel, and Joyce was left to superintend the unloading of the car.

And there, as Miss Allen stood looking on under the shadow of the old doorway, while the hotel porters shouldered the luggage, she became gradually aware that the process was being observed from the other side of the street. Looking across the roadway to a very wide and shallow window, above a tailor's shop, just opposite, she saw a man standing in the window; a tall man with a black or grizzled moustache, and a domed, slightly bald head. He stood behind muslin window curtains, supposing, Joyce thought, that he could not be seen. But her sharp eyes perceived him quite clearly, and the frowning attention with which he watched the arrival at the inn. Who could he be?

She followed the porter upstairs, to find Mrs. Wing inspecting the rooms they had ordered, and eagerly directing changes in the furniture so as to make them brighter and more home-like. A footman and maid had been sent down by an early train. They had brought flowers, and a few pieces of old brocade. With these, and some new books from Carrie's dressing bag, the sitting-room had soon lost its hot and dingy look; while next door, luncheon was already laid, and the table was a mass of roses.

"She will be here, directly," said Carrie, pausing to look at their handiwork. "We have made it look as nice as we can." And she went to the window to watch. Joyce, following her again, examined the window across the street with curiosity. But the man she had noticed was no longer there. And before she could mention him, Carrie gripped her by the arm.

"I shouldn't wonder if she's quite forgotten me!" she said in a choked voice.

"Oh, no! Don't think that. How long is it since you saw her?"

"Fourteen months. I came over from Paris on

purpose to see her in June last year. They sent her down to Dover. We met there too in a hotel!"

Then—with dull passion—"Isn't it monstrous—*monstrous!*—that I should have her so little! Ah, if women made the laws!"

Joyce only pressed her hand for answer. She could not answer in words. The girl's mind, torn perpetually between law and sympathy, as she became daily more attached to her cousin, and better acquainted with her history, was like an army hotly attacked yet steadily holding its positions. She loved—and she condemned.

Caroline vaguely understood; and was sometimes—though rarely—inclined to force her to speak out, to drive her into argument. Her dignity, as wife and lover, had forbidden her anything of the kind in the case of Llewellyn. But with this girl, so near to her, yet so unlike, she was often desperately inclined—indirectly and impersonally—to test the various arguments which had soothed her own conscience so far. But she had never yet done it.

"There they are!"

Carrie's nerve suddenly failed her. She turned helplessly to Joyce—

"Will you go and bring her up?" She pointed to a mud-splashed motor, which had arrived at the inn door, and to the figure of an elderly woman in black descending from it.

Joyce went downstairs. In the hall she found the elderly woman, with a little girl clinging to her hand.

"You are from Lady Marsworth?"

"Yes, madam. Where shall I find Mrs. Wing?"

"She is upstairs. I came with her this morning. I am her cousin. She sent me to show you the way. Will you shake hands, Carina? I am your cousin too."

At the sweet voice, the child whose eyes had been on the ground from the moment she entered the hotel, looked up. She was—Joyce saw—a fragile, slimly-built creature, with long legs and a delicately small head, on which she wore a motor-cap of pale blue. Her very thick and beautiful hair of brownish gold hung to her waist, and seemed to overburden the small shoulders and the slender neck. Altogether an attractive, distinguished little figure. But the look in her eyes when she showed them was so touching, that Joyce longed to kiss and comfort her there and then. The child was very pale. It was evident that she shrank from the meeting with her mother.

But she went quietly upstairs clinging to the hand of the woman who had brought her. At the door of the sitting-room, the maid released herself and said—

“I’ll go and unpack, Miss Carina, if this lady will show me your room.”

Joyce opened the door, and the child mechanically entered. As the door closed behind her, the maid said, as though something in Joyce’s face invited speech—

“She’s simply made herself ill, miss, about coming. But she’ll be all right soon.”

“Carina, darling!”

Caroline ran forward, and in a moment she was kneeling before Carina, unbuttoning the long silk coat, and taking off the child’s gloves and cap. Then when the small form in a white frock stood revealed, Carrie wound her arms round it, and sinking herself into a low chair, gathered her daughter to her, and kissed her hungrily—murmuring over her tender, inarticulate things.

Carina lay passive, for a little while. But as soon as she could, she disengaged herself, and sat erect on

Caroline's knee, looking round her shyly, and sometimes straightening the dress and hat of her doll which had got a little crumpled in the course of her mother's embraces.

"You weren't cold in the motor, darling?" said Carrie, taking two small and icy hands into hers, while her eyes devoured the pretty head with its flower-like droop.

"No, I had a shawl—Grannie's shawl," said the child, turning her head away, as though her mother's gaze made her uncomfortable.

"How is Grannie?"

"She's very well. She had a cold, last week. But Nannie and I nursed her. Now she's quite well."

The child's voice was thinly sweet, and her manner curiously precise, as though she were going through a lesson.

"Do you have a governess now, Carina?"

"Oh, no. Grannie teaches me—and sometimes Father."

"Father?" said Carrie in astonishment. "But Father's in Scotland?"

"No—Father isn't! He's staying with Grannie. We've got to meet him to-morrow—at St. Aloysius. Carrie could only suppose that John Marsworth's lay connection with the Jesuits, pending his appeal to Rome, had broken down. But she could not bring herself to question the child about her father; though it gave her a momentary excitement to know that on the morrow she might be for a short time in his neighbourhood.

"And what does Father teach you?" she asked after a moment.

"History—and——"

"And what, darling?"

"We read about Jesus," said the child, turning back to look at her mother, with a shy, bird-like gesture.

Carrie was silent a moment. Then she resumed her catechism.

"And does someone teach you music?"

"Yes—but—I don't like it."

"What do you like, Carina?"

"I like reading—and poetry—and riding—and I *love* drilling. When we go to London, Grannie will let me go to a gymnasium."

"Do you have some children to play with you, darling?"

"Sometimes—not very often," said the little voice reluctantly. "But once——" she looked up suddenly—"I had a little brother. Only he died."

Silence again. Then Caroline rose, keeping the child's hand.

"Now you must come and have dinner, darling. And then we will go out. Would you like to go in a boat on the river with Mother, and Cousin Joyce?"

Carina looked scared.

"Nannie will come too?" she asked quickly.

Carrie's heart knew its wound, but she merely said that of course Nannie should come, if she and Carina wished. Then by the door she paused—

"You remember coming to see Mother last year, Carina?"

"Yes," said the little girl, slowly—"a little. You had on a blue dress?" She looked up vaguely.

And that, in a whole year of life, was all the impression the child had retained—had been allowed to retain—of her mother. Carrie realised that, probably, during that year, Carina had never heard her mentioned. She had been kept out of memory and out of speech, till the unwelcome date came back when she must be allowed



to see the child again. And yet it was evident that the little girl was now aware of some tragic association with the tall lady with whom she was thus brought into periodic contact. She was very silent, both at the mid-day meal, and afterwards on the river, where they took a boat down to Iffley, and Carina, sitting between her mother and Joyce, was wooed—piteously, tenderly wooed—by Caroline, as only a mother can woo a child. But the little personality never gave itself away. She looked at Carrie often, with her beautiful puzzled eyes. She answered—a little primly, when she was spoken to; she gave particulars about her pony, and her two dogs “at home”; and she broke into a gurgling laugh of pure delight when she saw a brood of grey cygnets disporting themselves on the river bank. But all the time she clutched her doll tightly to her, she watched her Nannie perpetually, and as soon as they landed, she was at the maid’s side, slipping her little hand into hers.

And at night there was almost a scene, when Carina discovered that she was to sleep in a little bed in her mother’s room, and not with her Nannie. She gave one great sob, and then throwing herself on the floor face downwards, she cried bitterly, but as silently as she could. The child’s pain, and her self-control, were equally pitiful. Carrie turned white. But she sent the maid and Joyce away; and when the maid came back she found that Mrs. Wing had undressed the little girl, had washed her face and hands, and plaited her hair; and Carina was sitting on her mother’s knee, pacified and smiling, condescending even to eat a banana for her supper. It was Mrs. Wing—so the maid thought—who was near crying now.

And indeed when the child was safe asleep in her cot, and the long lashes lay quiet on the soft cheek,

Carrie was seized with a restlessness of grief and longing that could hardly be borne. While Joyce was writing a letter, Mrs. Wing put on her hat, and slipped out of the house into the summer evening.

The beautiful city lay before her flushed with rose in the sunset. The High Street was full of a cheerful crowd, imitating the crowd of term time. Young men in flannels, and girls in light summer dresses filled the pavements, coming back apparently from the river and the boats: a crowd of Oxford citizens enjoying their own town. Carrie passed through them, and struck westwards and northwards, making for the river meadows, and the Godstow towing path, which had been the favourite walk of her girlhood. And soon she was hurrying along the bank of the brimming river, amid a wide-spread marvel of light and colour. The sunset clouds were reflected in the wide slipping stream; all things were rose or gold; the tall poplars on the opposite bank, strained skyward in a wind-blown rank, scratched in dark line upon the splendour of the west. Around her, and in front of her, spread a vast green meadow, with flocks of geese upon it, and scattered horses grazing.

She felt very much alone, haunted by miserable thoughts, and consumed by an anguished longing for her only child—"bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." "Who has the right to take her from me?" she asked fiercely of the evening sky. "Hypocrites—Pharisees!—I suffered for her—I bore her. She is not John's—she is mine!" . . .

Then—in the wide expanse of the great meadow she became aware of a solitary figure, a man, descending the towing path from Godstow, and coming towards her. For some time as she walked on, she was vaguely aware of him, as she was of the distant tower of Godstow

Church, or the line of the Great Western Railway. But there came a moment, when a sudden perception rushed upon her. She stood still—breathless, and trembling; and the figure approached, a man with his eyes on the ground, switching absently at the reeds along the bank with his stick. Then he too looked up—looked ahead—started—and paused a few yards from her.

*“John!”*

The name died on her lips. Then an idea, a resolution took possession of her. She walked up to the man in front of her.

“It is very strange that we should have met like this,” she said, with composure. “But as we have met—I want you to let me speak to you.”

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## CHAPTER XI

SIR JOHN MARSWORTH recoiled a step or two, as he recognised the woman who in this complete solitude addressed him by his Christian name. He took off his hat, and then stood silent, very pale, his deep-set, small, but penetrating eyes fixed upon the speaker. It was evident that he was wholly—and disagreeably—taken by surprise; that he had had nothing to do with the meeting.

Carrie too had turned very white. But she spoke quite calmly.

"I have had Carina with me all day, John. And it has made me so unhappy that I could not stay quiet in the house. She is asleep now—and I came out—because I could not bear it—and—and it seemed to help—to walk and walk—till one was tired. I had no idea you were anywhere near."

"Let me say the same," was the stiff reply. "I had not the smallest intention of intruding on you. It was my intention to take Carina home to-morrow. My business was finished earlier than I thought."

"And you too came to look at old haunts," said Carrie, quietly. "I quite understand."

But in reality she did not understand at all. Why had he not come to Oxford by Lady Marsworth's motor with Carina and the nurse? Why tell them nothing of his business? He must have actually started from the same house, about the same time as they, for the

same town, and said not a word about it. However, she was only conscious of a momentary feeling of puzzle. She had graver things to talk about.

"May I walk with you for a time?" she said, looking him full in the face. "I want to talk to you about Carina. Whatever I may have done, she is my child—It was I brought her into the world."

Her lips trembled a little. Yet as she spoke her defiant pity for herself was drowned in something even sharper—a startled sense of the change which time had brought about in him, since she had seen him last in Florence some two and a half years before. Then he was a tall man of forty-one, looking younger, erect and vigorous in build, with peculiarly thick black hair, a strong black moustache, and a broad weather-beaten face, where the shaven whiskers and beard showed bluish-black through the tan of the skin. What had happened to him? He appeared to have shrunk in stature, in breadth of shoulder, in power of limb. A meaner and lesser man altogether seemed to be masquerading in John Marsworth's clothes, which by the way had no clerical or monastic suggestion about them whatever. And when he lifted his hat, she had noticed that the top of the head was bald, and the hair nearly grey. Was this what the Jesuit novitiate—a year of it—did for those subjected to it? Yet she had often heard it said that the hard training of it was physically as good for a man, as the training of an army recruit.

As she mentioned Carina she had seen the man's whole aspect freeze. He did not move.

"I do not think we can profitably discuss Carina. Everything with regard to her was settled long ago."

He stood there, leaning on his stick, haughtily inflexible. Carrie looked this way and that. Then the touch of comedy in the situation, tragic as it was, struck

her. Here they were, two human beings alone, in the midst of this flat expanse of meadow, much of it marshy after recent rain, with only one available path along the river back to Oxford. Even after all that had happened between them, could they not, as civilised man and woman, control feeling so far as to walk a mile in each other's company?

She waited a moment, poking the ground with her umbrella, and half-smiling—as he angrily perceived. How young and girlish she looked still!—in her close-fitting serge suit, and sailor hat. In the deepening twilight, she seemed to him scarcely a day older than when he had seen her first—a child of seventeen—with the same background of stream and poplar-fringed meadow. Her youthfulness, her unspoiled beauty awoke a hidden storm in him. Such women, born to wantonness, cannot suffer—they are incapable of what ages and wastes finer stuff. Insolence! that she should speak of her suffering—to him!

But she found speech at last.

"We are a mile from Oxford, John. If you will allow me to walk with you to Bossom's——" she pointed to the well-known boat-houses on the upper river—"I won't ask you to endure my company any longer. But you were always a just man—at least you meant to be—though you hate me now. Let me speak to you for a few minutes. You had your way with Dicky——"

Her voice broke, much against her will—

John Marsworth hesitated a moment longer, then made a movement of reluctant assent.

"You will only exhaust and agitate yourself. For if you mean to appeal to me to alter my decision with regard to Carina, I must tell you at once that you will appeal in vain. But if you must inflict such an experi-

ence on us both, I cannot help it. I will take you back as far as the boat-houses."

They stepped out—side by side. And both thought inevitably of other summer evenings in the past, when they had drifted down that famous stream as an engaged couple, or had moored their boat beside the lock at Godstow, or gathered the yellow *noli me tangere* under the ruins of the priory.

But Caroline did her best to concentrate her mind on what she had to say.

"John, I want to ask you—don't interrupt me for a moment—to let me have that child—for at least a fortnight in the year. It's too, too cruel—these few hours. She dreads the thought of coming—that's plain. She looks at me as a stranger—she hardly understands who I am—and by the time she realises a little, she's snatched away again. I don't plead for myself. But John, nothing can undo the fact that she's my child! She'll know and think much more about it as she grows older. And now it's so hard on her—this fresh shock and strain every year—and she gets nothing for it. I could make her so happy!—if I might have her a week at a time—two separate weeks,—one in the summer perhaps—and again in the winter. You have her all the rest of the year. Of course I know how wicked you think me. But that's all done. I'm married. I have my cousin Joyce Allen living with me. She's as good as gold, and very religious. Her father was a clergyman. She would always help me to look after Carina."

She paused, her breath fluttering. The expression of the man beside her showed not the smallest response—beyond a touch of satire. He shook his head.

"Your arguments don't affect me at all. You say, for instance, you could make her happy. But I have no wish whatever that you should make Carina happy.

I wish you to count for as little as possible in her life. It did not seem to me that I was justified in preventing your seeing her altogether. But I warn you not to attempt to force my hand. My bargain with you was made after much thought, and I intend to stick to it."

There was a pause. Then Caroline's bitter eyes met his. She could not restrain herself.

"And that's what a *Christian* says to me!—to a mother who—who longs for her child—her own, own baby! Isn't it enough what you did with Dicky, John?—and the wicked falsehood that you've let people believe of me, all this time?"

"I never told any falsehood of you," he said, sternly. "You did desert your child—and he did die."

"Yes—and—by your cruelty—not in my arms!"—she said, wildly.

"What is the good of recrimination like this!" he said, after a moment, more calmly. "It's the last thing I have ever wished. You have chosen your life, and I have had to adapt mine as best I could. In my eyes, of course, you are not married—you are living in sin. I am a Catholic——"

"I know. But why are you here?" she interrupted, sharply. "Have you given up the Jesuits?"

The question evidently struck home. In her mode of making it, and his of receiving it, there appeared some past knowledge in each of the other.

"I owe you no account of my life. I repeat, I am a Catholic, and for me divorce does not exist."

"You are a Catholic, but you have already begun to quarrel with them," she said triumphantly. "I understand. Whatever contented you for more than a few months, John?—your wife—or your country—or your religion? And I know when Carina grows up



you will make her miserable by that harsh, judging, criticising way—that—that——” She turned her face away towards the still radiant west, trying to beat down emotion.

Over John Marsworth’s countenance there passed first a spasm of anger; and then, something quite different—a look of pain—perplexity—weakness—as though her attack had found the soft places in a troubled consciousness. But he braced himself to answer.

“You have nothing to do with that. It is not for you to complain. Your own acts have cut you off from your child.”

“Yes—if you insist that they shall!” she cried. “But if you believed what you’re always saying, John, you’d admit there are other sins—than the sin I committed—which God punishes. Carina says you read to her ‘about Jesus.’ Do you ever let her read the things He said about ‘mercy’—and ‘forgiveness’? If I’ve broken one law, you’ve broken a good many too! I may question this law or that law, because I’m an unbeliever, but you can’t—you’re a Catholic. If there’s a Judgment Day, John—personally, I can’t believe in it—but if there’s one, as you’re bound to hold—you’ll have to answer for that night in the Val d’Aosta!”

Her voice, her look lashed him into rage. He saw her, dark against the blood-red sunset behind the river poplars, like an insolent, attacking Fury, when her proper place should have been at his feet—grovelling. He spoke with quickened breath, striking at her blindly.

“Our Lord offered mercy to the humble, the repentant—not those whose sin has been apparently so triumphant—so profitable—as yours!”

“Do you mean—that I am rich—and live in Eltham

House?" she said contemptuously; "and all the rest of it! You know me better, John. You know very well that money never bought me, and never could. Women like me live—by the heart. If you had won mine! but you never did."

"Then, let me ask, why you consented to marry me? On your own showing—according to your own doctrines, that, at least, was a crime."

"I suppose because you persuaded me," she said, with a voice which had begun to falter. "I was so young—and you seemed so good and wise. But—oh, for Heaven's sake, don't let's go on like this, John. I didn't mean to say unkind things when I began this talk. What's the good? What I wanted to say when I saw you—so suddenly—was vaguely—something like this. You and I *could* do nothing but hate each other—so far. If I wronged you, you wronged me!—horribly. The night of Dicky's death wiped out all my score. We are quits—more than quits—up to now. But—it might be possible for some kinder thoughts on both sides—if you would be good to me now about Carina. I never forget Dicky!—day or night. But I might learn to be sorry for us both—for you, as well as for myself—in looking back—if you would atone for what you did then—by being generous and merciful now."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"If you imagine that I could ever let my child set foot inside Alec Wing's house, or sit at his table—you are indeed deluded."

"I don't imagine it!" she said quickly. "Alec would never interfere. I should take her to the sea—or some quiet cottage in the country. How *could* I do her any harm, John? In spite of everything, you know—you *know* I am not a bad woman—I am not depraved.

I have many friends—men whom you respect—men like—Mr. Washington—or—or Mr. Llewellyn—men whom everybody admires.” Her pleading, her quavering breath—were very pitiful to hear; he found himself wincing under it. “They come to see me often. I take an interest in politics—in many public things. I am learning a great deal. As for flirting with men, that’s all over for me, long ago. I’m not fast. Our house is not fast. The people who come—politicians—and writers—and diplomats—are just the same sort as those you know. How *could* I do Carina any harm!”

“How many women come?” he asked her roughly.

“More than you’d think!” was the defiant answer. “Times are changed, John, in many ways. Half the world, I dare say, sides with you. But there’s a large slice of it that understands me. And when such a girl as my cousin—as Joyce Allen—consents to live with me——”

“How much does she know of your history? Not much, I think!”

“Everything.”

“Then you are doing the girl a wrong. She risks her reputation.”

Caroline laughed out. The words reminded her, too vividly for self-control, of those “home truths,” those admonitions “for the good” of those subjected to them, so freely dealt out by the John Marsworth of old days.

The laugh was heard by two people in a passing boat on the river, a “lover and his lass” coming down from Godstow through the rosy dusk.

“There’s two other sillies—like you and me!” said the lad joyously, to the girl in the stern, and she smiled, and nodded, trailing her hand in the water, and so absorbed in her own dream of happiness that she

scarcely turned to look at the pair walking along the towing-path.

But the laugh was as painfully effective as many of Caroline's laughs in the past had been. John Marsworth smarted under it. And Caroline followed it up, at first, in the old mocking way.

"I had almost forgotten you could say such brutal things! Now I remember. Well, never mind. Say what you like to me—only listen to me!" And suddenly her voice sank again to the soft, imploring note. "I shall go back to the inn—and I shan't let myself go to sleep. That would be wasting my few hours. I shall sit up beside her—all night—just watching her—and perhaps in the early morning—when she's less strange with me—she'll—she'll let me take her—and hold her—while she sleeps. And then it will be all over. You'll force her away from me. And I love every inch of her—from top to toe—every look—every word—my little darling! John, it's only a short life that any of us has. How do we know what will happen—before we die?—or when we shall die? Why be so hard on me? What good can it do you? Give me a little bit more of Carina's life! You'll be happier too—if you do. God will give it back to you!"

Her face was now wet with tears. He saw that she was terribly agitated, that her soul was in her words. But the sight only strengthened his stand against her. The undisciplined, romantic, eloquent Carrie—so stubborn, and so plausible—so appealing and so unmanageable—the Carrie who had betrayed him, ruined his life, and made him a laughing-stock—he heard only that woman in these beseeching cries, and he turned from them in disgust.

Standing still upon the path, he pointed to the boat-houses, which lay straight ahead of them.

"It is time, I think, Mrs. Wing, this scene should end. I shall leave you here. My will with regard to Carina remains absolutely unchanged by anything you have said. If possible I see more plainly than before, how your temperament might affect her, if I allowed her to see you more freely. Don't oblige me to withdraw my permission entirely."

"Do you know that when she is eighteen, she may, if she chooses, come to me altogether, and you can't prevent her!" said Caroline, breathing hard.

"I think I shall manage to prevent her. Now—if you will allow me, I'll leave you here. It is not really dark, and the way is quite plain. But you know it. And there are two people"—he pointed to the young man and his sweetheart, just leaving the raft where the boats were moored, and turning towards Oxford—"who are going the same road. You will not be alone. I beg to wish you good evening."

He raised his hat again, walked on quickly, and hailed a boat to put him across the river. In a few minutes he was lost to sight on the further side.

Carrie walked on blindly, trembling in every limb. What a scene!—how unexpected—how bitter! She felt like one physically beaten and worn out. What would Alec say to her, when he heard what had happened? Would he blame her, for having spoken—for having risked the rebuff—the humiliating rebuff inflicted upon her—his wife, his possession, his representative? His personal pride—and she knew it for measureless—would be wounded in her. She smarted indeed already, under the thought of his anger—the thought of confessing to him what had happened. Yet she could never conceal it. If she and Alec were to hide things from each other, "of what good shall my life be to me?"—to what purpose all this pain and loss

and hatred? If that, for the sake of which she had spoilt John Marsworth's life, and forfeited her child, and shut herself out from the respect of law-abiding men and women, were to fail her—then indeed!—

A great wave of fear swept across her—leaving her with fresh tears on her cheeks, while at the same time she mocked herself. As if Alec could ever fail her!—Alec, who adored her—though of course he was self-willed, and ambitious as all strong men are. No, she had made no mistake. Alec, and their happiness, Alec's arms round her, Alec's kisses, all the thrill and passion of his presence, of their life together day and night, were worth it all—well worth it all! "I would do it again—*again!*" she said to herself, with clenched hands, passionately. "Who could live with such a being as John—so cruel—so unforgiving? His treatment of me to-day—his manner—to Carina's *mother*—incredible—shameful! How it showed what he is—what I had to bear!"

A wild west wind was rising over the river flats. She walked on, battling with it, and with the spiritual blasts within—anger, self-pity, self-justification. She had done wrong—of course she had done wrong, according to the canons in which she had been brought up. She was thankful her father had died two years before her meeting with Alec Wing. But looked at from any ideal standard, anything beyond the common foot-rule of vulgar minds, John had sinned at least as badly—in selfishness, cruelty, tyranny. They were quits indeed!—as she had said to him—to his face!—just once. It had done something to slake an old thirst. She owed him nothing—nothing! They were enemies now—forever. And as soon as she could take Carina from him, by force or fraud, she would.

The strangest medley of wounded feelings possessed

her. All that was best and all that was worst in her rose against the man she had just parted from. Her passion for her child, and her injured vanity as a great lady, who in spite of all boycottings, had held the attention of London, and some of the most famous people in it, for the greater part of a season, were both alive in her. How *dared* John Marsworth speak to her—treat her—so! How little he realised that she whom he had married as an inexperienced portionless girl, was now abler, better informed and much more powerful in the world than himself! He did not realise it, because he was ignorant of all but a small fanatical society, in which he could make things be as he wished them to be.

But after all, he was the father—and present owner—of Carina!

Carrie re-entered the inn worn out. Joyce, who had been watching for her, exclaimed softly at her looks. The girl ministered to her in the tenderest way, guessing that she had been out by herself in search of healing solitude; and when Carrie, satisfied that Carina was sleeping quietly, allowed herself to be put on the sofa in the sitting-room, after dinner, Joyce came to sit on a stool beside her, and attempted to distract her. By way of gossip, she described the man she had seen in the bow-window over the way, at the time of their arrival. Caroline started, opened her languid eyes, and asked questions. *John!*—clearly John! What on earth made him do such a thing? Her familiar knowledge of Oxford told her that the fine old room over the tailor's shop was used as a club-room for the Catholic members and students of the University. John no doubt was a country member; and had used his membership in order to watch her coming that morning. Why? What should make him wish to see—from a safe distance—

the woman he scorned and hated? She could not help pondering the incident, half resenting it, half moved by it. But she did not enlighten Joyce. She supposed—she said—it was someone who knew her—or thought he did—from the old Oxford days.

Then they said "good night" to each other, and Carrie was glad to shut out even Joyce's tenderness, and to be alone with Carina. She drew her own bed close to the child's and lay high on her pillows, bending over that soft and perfect sleep. It was a night in which the maternal passion in Caroline—the only enemy of importance that Alec Wing had to fight in the crisis of their lives—reached a kind of ecstasy at once of joy and grief. The light was low in the room, but it was enough to show all the unconscious beauty, the helpless confiding grace of the little form. Sometimes Carrie would stretch out a hand and draw it lightly over the coverlet that she might realise the childish limbs beneath, and feel them for one night her own. And sometimes, watching every line of the closed eyes, the tranquil brow and rose-leaf cheeks, she would try and fancy how Carina would grow up—what she would be like at seventeen—at twenty.

All night the beautiful mother, beside the sleeping child, scarcely slept herself. The Oxford bells—from St. Mary's, the Cathedral, Carfax—called to her through the darkness as they used to call to her on those rare nights in her youth when—only a stone's throw away, in her little maiden room—she was awake to hear them. They brought with them associations, strange and subtly strong; suggestions of order, law, tradition; something stern and august, from which in her splendid maturity she shrank as she had never done in girlhood. Voices of a place where men have laboured for generations not primarily for gold, or success, or fame, but for some-



thing outside themselves—and near to God; voices of England's soul.

And in the early morning Carina stirred and opened her eyes. When she saw the face bending over her, and the hungry love in it, she was at first frightened. She frowned, her mouth took the shape of tears. But Carrie opened her arms; and the child let herself be drawn irresistibly out of her own bed into her mother's. Half asleep still, by some heavenly instinct she threw her hand round Carrie's neck, and Carrie in a passion of joy, that scarcely dared to breathe, held her securely wrapped in warm arms, till, with the child upon her breast, the soft beating of Carina's heart stilled and calmed her own, and at last she slept.

Later, when Carrie stepped out of bed, after the nurse had carried away Carina to dress her, she was so startled by her own appearance in the glass—pale cheeks and dark-rimmed eyes—that she must needs think with great alarm of Alec—Alec whom she was to find that afternoon at Bracebridge, the house recently built by Lord Wing on the Sussex Downs. What would he say to such a scarecrow? And some instinct told her that she could not now afford to be careless of her looks. She must not cry any more; she must not grieve any more. And when it was a question of Alec, her will rarely failed her.

So it was a composed and smiling, though heavy-eyed, mother who kissed Carina in the old hall of the Bishops' Inn and waved to her from the doorway as the motor disappeared along the High Street. Then Joyce was dropped at the railway station to return to London, and Carrie started by herself, in the magnificent Mercedes that Alec had lately given her, for the South Downs. The day was clear and hot. All horizons were blue; all the woods at their deepest; the shorn hay

meadows garishly green. The luxurious motion, the beauty of this England flashing by, the reaction from the scene of yesterday and the sorrow of the night, had soon brushed the cloud from Caroline's young senses. She was gay and happy again. For in a few hours she would be with Alec.

Yet she was far from insensible to Lord Wing's state, and possible death. She had had no time indeed to grow intimate with him. The relation of father and daughter had never been established between them; and probably never could have been. He was too old perhaps; and his life had been too remote from hers. But he had been very kind to her—very chivalrous and generous; when he might very well have rejected and disowned her. And she was grateful.

The dropping sun saw her climbing a long road east of Brighton to the top of the downs, where Lord Wing, tired of his various houses, and whimsically sick of antiquities, had built himself a low spreading bungalow, with few rooms, but those spacious, and windows looking north over the weald, eastward along the rolling crests of the downs, and southward over the sea.

Alec ran out to meet her, with a face in which, as it seemed to her, a mask of gravity hid something else, quite different, and forcibly repressed.

"He is very ill, but quite himself. He is expecting you."

Lord Wing in a flowered dressing-gown, sat with his hands upon his knee, quietly watching the lights over the Channel. His head and face were more spectrally white than ever; he seemed indeed an apparition, fading, almost diaphanous. But the eyes glittered still—invincibly alive.

He held out his hand feebly—but with his old courtly

manner. Carrie stooped and kissed him—at which he faintly smiled.

“Thank you, my dear. Sit down.”

She sat down, and he turned to look at her.

“What a beautiful woman!” he said, as though to himself—half dreamily.

Carrie flushed.

“Is there anything I could do for you, Father?” she asked, timidly. It was the first time she had called him that name.

“I want nothing,” he said, quite cheerfully. “And the doctors know nothing. But they can give me morphia—which is all I want. Well——” his bloodless lips attempted a smile—“and how goes the *salon*?”

Caroline looked perplexed.

“I did my best, Father. And you’ve been so good to us—so wonderful! But Alec has told you of his disappointment.”

Lord Wing still smiled.

“What does that matter? He’ll be in the Lords directly—with all the money he wants. Let him keep up the fight. One must have something to make the days *move*. That’s the difficulty. It’s like what Dizzy once said to me of Parliament—‘a horrid bore, except for *moments*!’ One must try for as many ‘moments’ as possible. I have tried all kinds of things—to not much purpose. Alec must go on—experimenting. It makes life amusing.”

There was silence for a little. He closed his eyes awhile. When he opened them again, he said sharply—

“I have got more pleasure out of Alec than out of anything else in life. But you know—or perhaps you ought to know—Alec’s heart is not his strong point!”

His expression—of indulgent mockery—sent a pang

of fear through her. She looked at him without speaking. He laid his hand on hers.

"I hope it won't fail you. You've staked a good deal. I see that. Keep him busy. Life for him should be a bustle—no stagnation. I should like to be there to see."

Silence again. His last words to her were very soft.

"Give him a child. It would help you."

Carrie kissed his hand—with a little sob.

After that, he spoke very little, and he parted from life with a wholly pagan urbanity and composure. Nobody proposed any religious function to him, and he asked for none. His last look was for Alec, and possibly by some trick of lip or eye, persistent to the last, the affection in it seemed to be still tinged with satire.

They took him back to the great ugly pile in the Midlands where Alec had been brought up; and he was buried with all the usual pomp and paraphernalia. Then came the opening of the will, and after his long interview with the lawyers Alec came out to his wife. His excitement was evident. He made her walk up and down a long passage with him, and ran through a first list of the possessions which had come to him. The wealth he had inherited was evidently far greater, even, than he had expected; and his exultation was plain.

"I shall take my seat in the Lords next week before the House rises, and shall be in politics directly. We'll form a new party, Carrie, you and I!—we'll have a press of our own—and, by George!—if Washington comes in next year, or the year after, and tries to boycott me, it will be at his peril. We'll play money and brains—against cant. Neither he, nor your prating friend Llewellyn, has any idea of the kind of resources I mean to develop!"

Carrie listened to him half dazzled—half foreboding.

That night she told him the story of her meeting with Marsworth. As she expected, it made him furiously angry, and he positively forbade her to run any such risks again. That the possession of Carina should give that curmudgeon of a fellow any opening, any excuse, for such an attitude, and such language to *his*, Alec Wing's, wife, stirred all the arrogance of a nature intoxicated anew by wealth, and by grandiose dreams of power. What he had done might seem to others cruel or wicked. It seemed to himself perfectly reasonable, because *he* had done it.

There was one personal sting for Caroline in these first days of Alec's inheritance, though neither she nor he acknowledged it to each other. The wonderful jewels which had belonged to Alec's mother, and to many of his ancestresses before her, were not, it seemed, heirlooms. They were entirely in Lord Wing's power to will. And they had been placed by his will, in a special trust, for "the wife of Alec's eldest son" should he have a son, or sons. Should there be no son, they were to go to Alec's daughters in order. And should Alec have no lawful issue, they were to pass to the family of the Duchess of C—— in order of survival.

"In no case are they to be mine," thought Caroline, who understood him perfectly. The jewels which the old man had lavished on her, were the signs of an individual indulgence, personal to himself. The jewels his dead wife had worn were the signs of something bigger than himself—the instinct and continuity of race. The Wings had been in many ways an unscrupulous clan, but their women had been chaste. There had been no adulteress among them.

That Lord Wing, with his singular attachment to Alec, his freedom from ordinary conventions, not to speak of the various *liaisons* with which he was ordi-

narily credited since his wife's death—of which indeed there were traces in his papers—should have felt and acted so, produced a deep effect for a time on Caroline's inner consciousness, though she never spoke of it, and had indeed long since divined this particular reluctance on Lord Wing's part. Yet as she and he had become better friends, she had perhaps ceased to believe in it; and this renewed proof of it hurt her. It was indeed a curious instance of that instinctive respect for law which can exist, as a kind of corporate sense, in the mind of one personally lawless. It was another and chilling indication of that strength of public opinion she and Alec—for all their enormous good fortune—had still to face.

■

## CHAPTER XII

IT was the night before the opening of Parliament. London, or rather the West End, was full of animation. The Ministerial and Opposition dinner parties were going on. Motors were dashing in all directions, and in one West End square, the ordinary traffic was entirely held up to allow the guests of a great Whig house to go and come, under the long portico, where amid bustling servants in splendid livery, a constant succession of women muffled in their opera cloaks, and men in uniforms and decorations, held a kind of outdoor reception, which was often more amusing than the party within.

Sir Oliver Lewson had put a lady into her motor, and was trying to get a taxi for himself, when he saw the portly form of the Duchess struggling through the throng, with a meek daughter behind her.

"Where are you off to?" he asked her. "Why, you've hardly put the tip of your nose in here, before you're gone again!"

"I've seen everybody I want to see. And now I'm off to something much more exciting."

"To Eltham House? Of course I'm going there too."

"So I supposed. Well, if you'll tell my man to go for the car, and then come and talk to me a few

minutes out of the draught, we might pick each other's brains on that subject a little."

Sir Oliver's expression in reply was not quite so forthcoming as usual. However the car was sent for, and with no expectation of seeing it emerge from the choked roads of the square under at least a quarter of an hour, he, the Duchess and the wisp-like daughter retired to a corner of the outer hall to talk.

The Duchess, Lewson perceived, was charged to the muzzle with that phenomenal interest in the affairs of her neighbours which made her so formidable. As to the Wings she could not ask questions fast enough. Wrapped round in a purple opera cloak, like a toga, from which emerged her plain, large-nosed face, her untidy hair, which she never allowed her maid time to dress, and her diamonds, she held Sir Oliver under fire.

"I suppose you stayed with them in the autumn? Of course you did!"

"I did—for five or six weeks. You know, of course, that I have become Alec's head-agent and factotum?"

"H'm. Yes, I did. Well, I hope he pays you well."

Sir Oliver laughed. The Duchess was allowed to say these things, and it was not worth while resenting them.

"Thanks! The work is enormous, and at present I can't overtake it all."

"Of course it is preposterous that any man should be allowed to have so much. I believe Wing, *my* Wing, Alec's father, just died of the fuss and worry of it."

"I don't think so. Lord Wing died because he was bored with living. There was no fuss or worry. He took care there shouldn't be."

"By neglecting all his duties? Well, of course Alec will do the same—though I do hear all sorts of queer tales about him."



"You are quite mistaken, my dear Duchess. Alec is working himself to death."

"Because he wants to win something—or crush somebody. Don't deny it. You know perfectly well those are his motives. Washington has offended him, and he intends to pay out Washington. What's this I hear about the newspaper?"

"The first number comes out next week. You'll see the staff at Eltham House."

"He won't succeed. There's a woman in the way—just one woman." The Duchess's small eyes twinkled.

"I suppose you mean Mrs. Washington?"

"Of course. The power that woman has is amazing. You should hear her speak in one of their tabernacles. I always go. Look here!—"

The Duchess glanced round her to see whether her daughter was listening. But that limp young lady was for once quite unconscious of her mother. She was watching a handsome Hussar in uniform, who was standing in the inner hall. The Hussar was flirting with a married woman, and had bestowed nothing but the most perfunctory notice on Lady Ida, as she descended the broad staircase in his neighbourhood. But she did not mind. It was enough that he was handsome, had white teeth, very black hair and wore his jacket magnificently. It was enough indeed to be in the same world with such a creature.

The Duchess therefore was safe from her offspring, and could whisper her advice into Lewson's ear.

"Tell Lady Wing—if she minds you!—to snub Washington a little. His visits to Eltham House are much talked about. And even saints can be jealous. Why does he go? He must know that the house—Carrie's *salon*—and all the rest of it—represents a

'cave' that may upset him. All sorts of plots are hatched there against him and his leadership. And yet he and Llewellyn dangle round Carrie as much as ever. It's undignified."

"Conscious power, perhaps," laughed Lewson. "They're not afraid."

"More fools they. Washington's by no means so safe as he and his friends think. He may play the Johnny Head-in-the-Air once too often."

"Well, my dear Duchess, I have nothing to do with Alec's politics. I am only concerned with his estates, which I assure you are enough for any reasonable man."

"How many country houses?" asked the Duchess, peremptorily.

"Six or seven—important ones—with villas and bungalows innumerable. To build a new house was Lord Wing's way of taking a tonic. It gave him a fillip—which was all he wanted. But the really interesting thing is that we have discovered a lot of London property. I being old-fashioned desire to treat it commercially. Alec seems to wish to treat it politically—to make a Socialist splash. Don't tell him I told you!"

"Alec, I always knew, would turn on his own class," was the impatient reply. "He'll play Philippe Egalité, because Washington wouldn't give him a seat, and because Carrie can't go to a Drawing-room. But he won't get anything by it. Several people you and I know have tried it—mostly women. It don't answer. The working-class isn't taken in. But there's something much more important than this I want to know——"

The Duchess looked round her—but Lady Ida was still watching the Hussar. Her mother lowered her voice.

"Tell me about Madge Whitton. There are all sorts

of rumours. They say Alec's been seeing a great deal of her—that somebody's been lending her money—and so forth. H'm?" The speaker turned a sharply interrogative eye on the man beside her.

Lewson shrugged his shoulders—

"Ask me another, Duchess. A man as deep in death-duties as I am has no time for these matters."

"How tiresome you are!" cried the Duchess impatiently. "You and I have gossiped for twenty years."

Sir Oliver laughed, but without yielding a fraction. Immediately afterwards, the Duchess caught sight of a gesticulating footman. She invited Lewson to accompany her, and all three were soon on the way to Eltham House. But midway—as Lewson noticed—Lady Ida was dropped at home.

"Heavens, what a crowd!" cried the Duchess, as they entered the street, towards the eastern end of which rose the great gates of Eltham House. "And what impudence it all is! Four official parties—and Eltham House!—bigger than any of them. Look at the men—pouring in—without their wives!" And she pointed to a large limousine in the rank beside them full of men in uniform, much bemedalled.

"Some pretty women too!" said Lewson confidently, as another car passed them.

"Pooh! Foreigners—or actresses. All the diplomats' wives go to Carrie—the rich Americans—the feminists—artists and theatrical people—and all Wing's poor relations."

"A pretty big London, by itself!"

"Ah, I dare say, but not the London Wing wants. He knows what the women of our class can do for a man."

"Apparently—according to you—it is one woman,

of another class—a woman who preaches in tabernacles—that matters most.”

“That’s the religious force. Horribly strong—I grant you. But if they had the *social* force with them, they could beat it. The Royalties however have settled that.”

Lewson did not pursue the subject, and the Duchess at last plainly perceived that while Wing had gained an invaluable agent, she herself, on the subject of the Wings, had lost a confidant. All that Lewson knew he would no longer communicate to her, and she chafed, like the autocrat she was, under such inconvenient discretion.

The crowd was indeed enormous, and the scene in the glistening hall, and on the famous double staircase of Eltham House—except for those who had an intimate knowledge of those particular groups and persons supposed, by themselves at any rate, to be leading London society—could scarcely have been more brilliant.

At the top of the stairs stood Caroline Wing, the most beautiful woman amid a throng of other women of very varied types; a throng which in Lewson’s eyes made up in good looks what it lacked in birth—or, possibly, morals. Her hair, her neck, her dress, shone with jewels, and she herself shone more than they. It seemed to him, as he withdrew to a position in a doorway near, whence he could watch her receiving her guests, that she had both gained and lost since her arrival in London as Wing’s wife nearly a year before. She had lost something of freshness, of that intangible enchanting bloom which is merely youth, merely the dew on the rose. On the other hand she had gained enormously in self-governance, in consciousness of the world about her, in personal dignity; so that on the whole her beauty was a more dazzling thing than ever.

As to her character, Lewson reflected that he had gained a much clearer knowledge of it, during the six months which had elapsed since he had last come with the crowd to Eltham House. A kind of accident—nothing more than a casual meeting and conversation at a shooting party, early in the preceding autumn, had led to Wing's offering him the principal agency on his enormous properties, with a salary so high that the ex-Indian civilian could not resist it. Perhaps, however, Lewson had been as much attracted by the work as by the money. He had been a very successful Indian administrator, and since his return home, at not much more than fifty, he had known moments of dullness, which had never attacked him before. Land and all the problems of land were his hobby, and when Wing came to him, impulsively offering some of the greatest estates in England as a field for experiments, and unlimited money to try them with, the quick mind and vigorous personality of the elder man caught fire. He accepted the charge, and had been since renewing his youth. Incidentally also, he had been making a close study of his employer and his employer's wife; for which the materials had been ample, seeing that he had spent much of the autumn in their company at one or other of their super-abundant country houses.

It was clear to him that Lady Wing had been at first excited and amused by the multitude of their new possessions; flattered too, possibly, by the natural subservience of a large section of mankind towards the possessors. Pictures, books, heirlooms of all sorts, the spoils of generations, which in many cases had been lying forgotten for years, in houses substantially "kept up" but never visited; all these had supplied adventure and entertainment for months. Lady Wing had called in experts to help her, and there had been a fine

searching of treasure-heaps, as thrilling as such searches commonly are. But in other ways she—and Wing—had passed through a very chequered experience. They had made a kind of royal progress through the Wing estates, and their reception had varied greatly. In general the tenants had welcomed them effusively, understanding that a régime of general neglect was coming to an end, and that the young lord was prepared to carry things with a high and generous hand. Wing had made several political speeches, which had been well received by both farmers and labourers. There was to be liberal expenditure on small holdings and allotments—liberal allowances for repairs—in some districts liberal reduction of rent. So far, so good. But the *social* side of the business had been a good deal more doubtful.

In some districts indeed, Lewson had seen but small signs of boycotting. The new-comers had found a whole neighbourhood apparently on tip-toe—expectant of subscriptions, entertainments, favours of all kinds; ready to offer bouquets to Caroline, and addresses to Wing, on the smallest provocation. In other places the pair had seemed to come and go, amid a frozen silence—no notice taken of their arrival by any of the neighbours, except such as were in some business relation to them; a few paragraphs in the local papers; a few official visits from people who could not help themselves—and nothing more. Sometimes this had happened under the influence of a local religious leader—Anglican or Dissenting; sometimes it was the local big-wigs—the neighbouring land-owners—who had dictated a rigorous ostracism, especially of Lady Wing. But well-received or ill-received, these two handsome young people had been always in the limelight, always conscious that they were the talk of a countryside, and

that their doings and sayings were of great importance to thousands of people.

Under these influences, as Lewson's secret thoughts admitted very plainly, Alec Wing—to put it gently—had not improved. The megalomania always latent in his temperament had developed amazingly; opposition enraged him; and the men who opposed or disappointed him, were always, according to him, either sickly hypocrites or envious fools.

And had this general temper of bitterness, of thwarted, and yet determined ambition, reacted in some strange way upon his relation to his wife?—in that she was constantly reminding him of the most teasing barriers in his path? That was what Lewson occasionally asked himself; always with an indignant rush of feeling on Lady Wing's behalf. Was it Wing's instinct to visit the "cutting" which befell them both, especially in certain high quarters, upon the beautiful woman who worshipped him—as in some way her special fault? Lewson knew very well that a man who is forced by her kindred or by public opinion to marry the woman he has betrayed, can hate the victim—now become the avenger—as keenly as he had ever wooed the mistress. The same unconscious reasoning seemed to be at work here. Whenever penalty made itself felt, Wing's irritability or arrogance seemed to suggest that it was the woman's affair only. The man resented any share in it.

As to Caroline Wing herself, Lewson, now that he knew her better, was aware of just the same mingling of homage and pity in his feeling towards her as he perceived in Robert Llewellyn and other men. Her beauty was wonderfully appealing, partly because she thought so little of it herself, partly because of the frank or childish elements in her nature which made it more

difficult for her than for other women to hide the movements of conscience or feeling. He saw, for instance, that she suffered—much more now than when they first reached London—from the strength of public opinion against her; that there was something indeed in her own mind which was always betraying her to her judges, while yet always rallying in the end to a passionate defence of love and its rights. And he often perceived a great weariness in her; weariness, he thought of the endless parade and clatter of the life that Wing made her lead. Sorrow too—for causes he could only guess at. But he perceived that she was made for children, and she had none. That supreme sacrifice of her Marsworth children she had faced for love of Wing; and she had never recovered it.

Was there anything serious in the talk about Mrs. Whitton—in the gossip about Lord Melton's devotion? Lewson felt that he knew no more than anybody else . . .

. . . Ah! there was Melton coming upstairs—and Mrs. Whitton a few steps behind him. Involuntarily Lewson moved forward a little to watch. He saw young Melton's dark and striking face—striking rather than handsome—break into a charming smile, as he reached his hostess; and he perceived that instead of going on into the drawing-room, young Melton took his place beside Lady Wing, ready to win a word or a look from her in the intervals of her handshaking, and that she turned to him when she could, with a soft and open expression, as one turns from strangers to a friend. Her reception of Mrs. Whitton, on the other hand, seemed to him markedly cold and careless. "She can't pretend as well as others," he said to himself and he liked her the better for it. But if she had little to say to Mrs. Whitton, Mrs. Whitton was apparently primed with



a great deal to say to her—and others. She too stood for a little while at the stair head, conspicuously talking and laughing. Then Lewson perceived Alec Wing in the doorway behind his wife, and presently Mrs. Whitton had slipped through the crowd in his direction. Lewson caught her smiling upward glance, and Wing's recognition. She seemed to pass her host and go on into the crowd behind him; but Lewson had a curious certainty that they would not lose sight of each other.

"Well—how's the new post going?"

The speaker was Llewellyn. Lewson hailed him with pleasure, though not without something of the same surprise that he should be there as the Duchess had expressed.

They talked a little about the agency. Then Lewson inquired after the King's Speech, which, according to time-honoured custom, had just been read at the official dinners of the night—given by the leaders in both Houses to their supporters.

"Anything new or exciting?"

"Oh, lord, yes! They've made up their minds at last. They're bringing in a strong Protectionist budget. It will be a splendid row, and we shall beat them on it. They're probably riding for a fall. Our host here, I understand, will support them."

Llewellyn turned his chubby cheeks and smiling eyes upon his companion. He looked extraordinarily wise, ugly and confident.

"I hear also," he resumed, "that Wing will make his first speech to-morrow in the Lords—a hot attack on Washington?"

Lewson nodded.

"He has been taking great pains with it."

"No doubt. Can you point me out any of the men who are running the paper?" asked Llewellyn.

Lewson picked out one or two from the crowd. Llewellyn looked at them with a benevolent half satiric interest.

"Ah, yes—I know—clever fellows. But I understand the editor is not yet found."

"No. Wing has set his heart on a particular man——"

"And can't get him!" laughed Llewellyn. "I think I'll back Wing. Well, the programme of the paper looks very catching—Protection, Socialism—and militarism. I dare say Wing'll make us old Liberals sit up."

Sir Oliver surveyed him.

"I never saw anyone less alarmed," he said dryly. Llewellyn laughed.

"I assure you, if Wing gets the man he wants, Washington and I shall shiver in our shoes. There are a number of M.P.'s here to-night," he added, looking round the surging crowd with a sudden intentness.

Lewson made no remark. There *were* a number of M.P.'s streaming in from the different official parties, some in Levee dress.

"I foresee an 'Eltham House party,'" said Llewellyn smiling. "But Lady Wing promises still to let me come and see her! I must go and get a word with her."

Llewellyn found his hostess in one of the inner drawing-rooms, a very famous room, walled with cases of old Nankin, which English and European museums had so far sighed after in vain. Amid the gleaming show of lustrous blue and white, where all light in the room came from the illuminated *vitrines*, he found Caroline Wing holding a court of intimates, while

the mass of her guests were streaming downstairs to supper.

She made room for him beside her with a grace in which, however, he now perceived an increasing embarrassment. And he himself was much more keenly aware that his position in the house was a difficult one than the Duchess gave him credit for. Wing indeed had taken the Penwenack letter—which was couched in perfectly civil terms—with haughty sangfroid, so far as the Liberal leaders were concerned. A few gibes as to “your Non-con. masters,” conveyed his answer to Llewellyn’s advice, given through Carrie; and there had been a short conversation between Washington and the new peer, in which Washington had expressed his regrets for a decision inevitable “at the present moment,” and Wing had given warning of his intentions as a political free lance, without however any personal rupture between the two men.

Both Washington and his chief lieutenant, therefore, had been seen occasionally at Lady Wing’s Sundays, since the Wings had returned to Eltham House in November, to the astonishment of many beside the Duchess.

To-night, however, in the Eltham House crowd, Llewellyn was very conscious of a new atmosphere of agitation—of “things” going on—and those things not at all to the interest of the Front Opposition bench. Groups melted away as he approached; conversations were hushed. He recognised a number of journalists, some of them belonging to that army of discontent which gathers on the flank of any great party, and is always ready for adventures. Washington had indeed lost ground somewhat since his speaking campaign of the summer. He was said to have wasted or misused opportunities given him by his opponents, to have

offended important members of the party in small social ways; the blame for which was generally put down to Mrs. Washington. Washington's own followers were confident of success in the coming battle with the Government. Llewellyn himself was confident. All the same there were elements of danger in the situation. And this rise of a party of *frondeurs* amply supplied with money, and led by a man bearing a great name, and commanding vast resources—handsome, vain, eloquent and, in many circles, likely to be extremely popular—was by no means an incident to be despised.

"Well, so Wing speaks to-morrow?" said Llewellyn to Carrie, having at last secured a few private minutes with her. "I wish him all success. Of course he will attack us. That we expect. But I hope *you* will be pleased with him."

Caroline's eyes rested upon him in reply, with an expression—sweet and dumbly appealing—which seemed to say—"Yes!—we are friends—but—now—alack! we can't talk!" Llewellyn understood, somehow, that she remembered well—would never indeed forget—their intimate conversation on that August evening under the trees; but that life since then had passed into a new phase, and she was now her husband's unquestioning and obedient lieutenant. She spoke guardedly of Alec's plans. She said it was all "very interesting"; he had found a great deal of unexpected support in many quarters; and so on. Llewellyn realised that he had personally lost much ground with her; though perhaps not by her own wish. And the heart of a man, simple and sensitive to a point not easily guessed by those who chiefly realised in him the gifts of the shrewdest brain in the Liberal party, suffered sharply. He valued her friendship enormously. He

knew too that he had been able to befriend her; and it was no more easy, now than in the summer, for him to divest himself, in regard to her, of a deep and prophetic instinct of pity. Such a feeling seemed of course ridiculous. Here was a woman, under a certain amount of social punishment, no doubt, from various powerful forces in the life around her, evidently conscious of it and wounded by it, but at the same time, in other respects, at the envied top of fortune. The very society which excluded her talked incessantly of her beauty, her doings, her dress and her wealth. And that wealth was no vulgar new-made store which could be laughed at and despised by an aristocratic class. On the contrary it represented all that is most coveted in an old society. Was there indeed any woman who had mounted the Eltham House staircase that night, who would not have taken Lady Wing's role—with all its drawbacks—if it had been offered her? Perhaps a few—but certainly not many. Why then this sore premonition at the bottom of his mind—this emergence in a scholar's memory of well-worn lines and phrases in which men of old expressed their own haunting sense of human fate?—

*"Many things the Gods accomplish unexpectedly. And the things that were looked for come not to pass" . . .*

And again—

*"Call no one happy till he have passed the goal of life, and the chances of pain."*

Pedantic absurdity! who else would dream of bringing such thoughts into connection with this radiant creature in her splendid dress, who sat beside him

waving her fan backwards and forwards, and occasionally detaching her eyes from her companion to send a nod or smile to some passer-by eager for notice. In this world she had gathered about her he saw that she was now a queen, and beginning to play the role consciously. Would it spoil and coarsen her? If so—once more—the pity of it!

"You are going to-morrow—to the show?" he asked her as he rose from the chair which was evidently coveted by other people.

"To the House of Lords? Oh, yes. I must hear Alec, of course!"

But a sudden flush invaded her cheeks, as she gave him her hand in farewell, and she turned rather hurriedly from him to speak to an old diplomat who was approaching her.

Llewellyn went off, and by the time he had found his coat and was waiting on the steps for a taxi, he had remembered—stimulated by Lady Wing's change of colour—certain things, which a man who cared little for forms and ceremonies had temporarily forgotten.

The Wing peerage was a very old one, and the holder of it—wasn't he entitled to some special function in Royal processions? Not the bearing of the "cap of maintenance" exactly!—but something akin to it; tomfoolery in democratic eyes, and coveted honour in those of ordinary mortals. He could not remember precisely what it was, and did not care. But some privilege of the kind existed—he was certain of it. What was going to happen in the procession to the House of Lords on the morrow? Would Wing be allowed the bauble, or denied it? What gossip, what agitation must be going on! Yet the wife, who adored Wing, and would be up in arms for him, were a slight

inflicted, meant all the same to brave the public eye. Plucky woman!

Llewellyn drove off, more concerned than he had ever been yet for a detail of Court ceremonial.

The crowd in the great house had thinned a good deal. A few young people were dancing in one of the drawing-rooms to an enchanting band; there was still a room full of bridge-players; and a last relay at the supper-tables. Beyond the supper rooms stretched the spacious winter garden of the ground floor, a conservatory which, in defiance of the winter, was now a marvel of bloom and scent. In its further corner amid a brilliant labyrinth of azaleas, two people had just met for intimate conversation. They were Lord Wing and Madge Whitton. Lord Wing had only just escaped from his host's duties towards various diplomatic big-wigs, and it was evident that Mrs. Whitton had been waiting for him in this secluded spot by arrangement.

"A plague on ambassadors!" he said as he threw himself into a low chair beside her. "I thought I should never get rid of them. Well, have you any news?"

He raised himself to look at her. His face was flushed, and frowning. The eyes showed deep lines of fatigue, and the careless good nature which had shone from Caroline's splendid lover less than a year before had dropped like a cloak from his restless and hardened maturity.

Madge Whitton smiled. She slowly drew up her long gloves over her thin arms; then leaning back against a gorgeous background of red azalea, which seemed to be there on purpose to make a setting for her fair hair and slender frame, she lifted her eyes to her companion.

"Oh! how hard I have been working for you!"

"Have you? You little brick! But have you got him?"

"I told you he was the most impossible person to manage—didn't I?"

"And I gave you *carte blanche!*" he said impatiently. "Don't—*please*—keep me on tenterhooks. Yes—or No?"

"You never saw such airs and graces! 'He was not the man to be bought—money was of really no importance to him'—ahem!—'the work, the opportunity was all he thought about.' I could hardly keep from laughing in his face. But I played him like a trout. I gave him as much posing and bluffing as he liked to take—and then—I struck!"

"You mentioned the terms?" said Wing smiling, his tension relaxing.

"I just put the figures delicately!—oh, so delicately—under his nose, and in twenty minutes I had him in the basket. I'm afraid my metaphor has got a little mixed. But never mind. Now what do I deserve?"

"You've got him—really?" he said, joyously.

"Really. He's coming to see you to-morrow—and will take up work whenever you choose."

He stooped, raised her hand which was lying on her lap, and kissed it.

"You are a winner! Carrie could make no impression on him whatever!"

"Ah, well, you see you want a vulgar creature like me!" said Mrs. Whitton composedly. "Lady Wing is too—refined—grand style! to deal with that kind of man. One must put things plainly. But you've got him!"

She lay back again, with a little nod of triumph—



adding after a moment—with a touch of affected shyness—

"I really think I have done something for you this time!"

"I should think you have!" he said, with eyes that sparkled on her. "I don't like the man any more than you do—or Carrie does. But he's the only man to make that paper go."

"The only man!" she repeated. "But I wish you joy of him! Now I must go home."

"May I come and see you to-morrow?"

"I—suppose you may," she said slowly, with her eyes on the ground.

"Of course I may. Aren't you in it—this new venture—with all of us? And I shall want to know what you think of my speech."

"Yes? By the way, many thanks for my ticket for the House. I have read the MS. you sent me. It's splendid!"

"I'm glad you think so! Carrie criticised it enormously!"

"Ah well, she's the critic on the hearth—that's her function. I couldn't criticise, I confess. I was carried away."

His face showed his pleasure. They walked along together into the hall crowded with departing guests. She went for her cloak, and Alec with easy courtesy looked after various ladies who were waiting for their cars. But when Madge Whitton reappeared he took her to the door, and saw her safely into a particularly elegant landaulette, from which she smiled to him her farewells.

"Well, she's done me a good turn—no denying it!—and I gave her that motor!" he thought to himself half laughing, as he turned away. "But anybody who

supposes that I'm in love with her is a fool—beginning with Carrie. I like going to see her—and I mean to go to see her. And I've found her uncommonly useful. And that's all there is to it."

As he recrossed the hall, however, his face resumed its bitter and harassed expression. To avoid his guests he went up one of the subsidiary staircases leading to the first floor and the gallery running round the central hall.

And there—suddenly—he caught sight of his wife standing in the doorway of one of the drawing-rooms watching someone who was descending the stairs. Her look arrested him. It was full of emotion, as of one who has just come through some touching or surprising experience. And as he came nearer Wing perceived that the person she was watching was Lord Melton, who was slowly descending the stairs—on which he was now the only figure—with his eyes fixed on Caroline. Eyes of worship and of grief in a pale strained face; eyes—unmistakably—of a man desperately in love.

Alec Wing stood still, possessed by a silent fury of jealousy. It was not jealousy, however, of any ordinary kind. He had no doubts whatever of Carrie. But he resented the particular quality of Melton's devotion to her. That Melton disliked him, and thought him unworthy of his wife, he had long divined, with the instinct of the egotist. And the letter Carrie had once let him read had never ceased to smart in memory; even when Melton was staying in his house, during the autumn, and they were on outwardly good terms.

He walked up to Caroline with a careless air.

"That was rather public, Carrie. Lucky for you there was no one about. I wouldn't let that youth

give himself away quite so Byronically if I were you."

Caroline looked at him quietly, and he saw that her eyes were brimming with tears. But she said nothing, and he followed her towards her sitting-room, in a growing temper.

When the door was shut upon them, she went towards the fire, shivering a little, and throwing a light lace shawl over her neck and throat, she stood with one foot on the fender, staring down into the dying embers, and evidently wrestling with herself.

"Upon my word, Carrie!"—he exclaimed, angrily—"anybody who didn't know you as I do, would think a thousand things."

"Well, you know better!"—she said, in a stifled voice. "But if you suppose that any woman can lose a friend like that—so kind—so, so devoted—without feeling it, you are mistaken, Alec."

"So you've given him his *congé*?"

"I've told him not to come here again."

"A good thing too, my dear. There is a great deal of talk about. I wonder why you have let him come so long?"

"By your express wish!" said Carrie, raising her head indignantly. "I asked you when we came up to town, whether he should be invited, and you laughed and said, 'Why not! What does it matter!' And as to *talk*! . . ."

The wounded pride and passion in her look affected him—perhaps daunted him a little. But he tried not to show it. He dropped into a chair, and crossed his knees, with a laugh.

"For Heaven's sake let's drop this. On your own showing, I'm not jealous of you—never have been. But you make my life a burden to me for no reason

at all. Look here!—I've got two pieces of news for you. Of course I managed to get some private talk with Madge Whitton to-night! She's done me—you and me—a rattling service, and she's worked hard for it. She's got Donovan to take the post."

"She has?" The tone was surprised—hesitating. "Well, I congratulate you."

"You may. And—I say it for the hundredth time—don't please make yourself and me ridiculous in that quarter again. The other piece of news, I of course expected. So did you. I have heard from Ashmole."

He named a well-known friend and confidential adviser of Royalty; an intermediary through whom the delicate social affairs of a generation, so far as they concerned the Court, had been transacted, with a minimum of friction and a maximum of success.

"Well?" His wife turned to him, very pale now, but with the look of one forewarned.

"What we expected. If I claim my rights, there will be no public refusal of them. Indeed, it's most probable that I could enforce them in a Law Court. But Ashmole appeals to me—to my good feeling—consideration for H. M.—and all the rest of it. On his own account, of course."

"So you won't claim them? And you still wish me to go?"

"Go? I should think so! Fling defiance in their teeth! I would force the thing in a moment," he went on fiercely, "if it weren't for my campaign. But people are so besotted in this country—as to Royalty! No! let the rotten thing go! I have more serious business on hand! But you and I, Carrie, have got our backs to the wall!—no mistake about that!"

She sighed—involuntarily. And the sound enraged him.

"You haven't got the spirit of a mouse!" he declared. "You fail me just when you should be all iron and fire!"

He had risen, and she quailed before his wrath.

"I don't fail you—I will never fail you!" she said. And then—irresistibly—she raised her arms, and put them round his neck. "But I'm—so tired!"

The low-spoken word—with its half despairing intonation—was lost upon his breast.

"Why are you always complaining of being tired?" said Wing, half vexed, half appeased. "As if it wasn't the natural thing! Haven't you been shaking hands with eight hundred people? Run along now, and get rested for to-morrow. I must sit up a bit—answer this precious production of Ashmole's—and go through the proof of my speech."

■

### CHAPTER XIII

“ALL very well, my dear Theodora”—said the Duchess, unloosening the strings of her bonnet—“You may say what you like, but Wing’s speech yesterday was an *event*!”

“I don’t see that that matters,” was the obstinate reply. “It was an *event* when our first footman stole my diamonds and turned out to be an escaped burglar, so that we had to call in the police.”

“Ah, but your man got nothing out of his splash, and Wing’s got a good deal—already. All the world’s talking about his speech, and his blessed paper—when they’re not talking about the procession affair—of which of course not a word has got into the press!”

“People will talk about anything and everything,” said Lady Theodora, rather pettishly. She poured out her own cup of tea, having already provided her sister-in-law, and then resumed in an argumentative tone—“Nobody ever said that Alec Wing was a fool—and with all that money of course anybody can make a flare-up. But nobody that I see believes that he’ll get what he’s evidently driving at—a place in an English Government!”

“He has a very good chance of it—if it weren’t for Elizabeth Washington,” said the Duchess in meditation. Then she pushed her empty cup towards the tea-maker.

“Tell me, Theodora, where do you get your tea? It

does you credit." Lady Theodora gave the address—much flattered, though nothing in her somewhat grey and bony countenance revealed it. But she regarded her sister-in-law, though she was not in the front rank of duchesses, and far from well-to-do, as duchesses go, as yet a great person, and her approval warmed the cockles of the heart.

The Duchess took out a shabby little note-book from a capacious pocket, and wrote down the address. She was attired with her usual contempt for seemliness, in a long fur coat much the worse for wear, and a comfortable bonnet of her own design which she tied under the chin. Her daughter and maid insisted that when she opened bazaars, or gave prizes, or did any other of the ceremonial things that noble flesh is heir to, she should appear, as they said, "decent." This particular afternoon, however, she had spent in bargaining with an Oriental dealer in the East India Dock Road for a Persian carpet; so that she had dressed as she liked, and having beaten down the dealer to her own figure, she was in high spirits and much at her ease.

Returning to the subject of the Wings, Lady Theodora declared with emphasis that it would be a great mistake to attribute too much to the influence of Mrs. Washington.

"The whole party stands together. I may claim to know something about the feeling of Church people! Elizabeth Washington of course takes her cue from the Dissenters. She was brought up a Quaker; but now she sits at the feet of that Presbyterian preacher somewhere in Westminster. There isn't a ha'porth of difference between us all. The Church Liberals and the Dissenting Liberals are equally determined that we won't have men in Parliament who have seduced other men's wives

—if we can help it—and we won't have them in the Government!"

Lady Theodora, in delivering this verdict, reminded the Duchess of nothing so much as of a figure on a piece of archaic Greek sculpture, in the hall of her Leicestershire house, representing, so the scholars assured her, Rhadamanthus—a gentleman employed in judging the dead. His long forbidding features, mostly rubbed away, had long been associated in her mind with the function of "damning." It was odd how much her sister-in-law resembled him.

Aloud, she said, with a shrug—

"All very well, my dear Theodora, but you won't get a Government or a Parliament of 'plaster saints,' whatever you do. However, I dare say you're right in your facts. We live in a queer world. And I admit that Alec is fair game. But the odd thing is—now don't scream!—that all the time Caroline is just as 'religious' a woman as Elizabeth Washington!"

The Duchess, with malicious eyes waited for her sister-in-law's outcry.

Lady Theodora relieved herself by driving off her lap her little black spitz which had clambered there. The dog descended on the rug, and sat there in injured dignity, turning reproachful eyes on its mistress.

"Well, of course, if you choose to use the words in a meaning that nobody else understands!—"

"Not at all!—what does anybody mean by 'religious'? You mean a person that wants 'to be good'? Well I say that Caroline Wing 'wants to be good' just as much as Elizabeth Washington—or you!"

Lady Theodora laughed indignantly.

"She has gone an odd way about it!"

"That doesn't matter. How many great saints have



been great sinners, please?—and what about the woman 'who loved much'?—etc. All I mean is that Caroline Wing is a good woman still in spite of everything. It's queer, but it's true. Of course we can't let that kind of thing off—we all know that. What are the laws for?"

The Duchess lay back in her chair, untied her bonnet strings a little more, and crossed her plump hands upon her knee.

"They're just dykes—to keep the flood out. We've got to protect marriage; else we should turn into Barbary apes again. So it's all right to make it reasonably hot for Caroline! All the same, I repeat, at bottom she is a better woman than all but a few of those who are now engaged in sitting on her."

Lady Theodora disdained reply. She had taken up her knitting, and her fingers flew. The Duchess, observing her, with an eye half good humoured, half satirical, went on—

"I hear—for instance—there's a horrid row in the Committee of the Royal Hospital League. Perhaps you know all about it? Somebody seems to have proposed to put Caroline on the Committee. The male Wing gave them a thousand pounds just before Christmas, when they were desperately hard up. So old Lady Watts asked her if she would join the Committee. And the poor thing said 'yes.' And now half the big-wigs are threatening to leave the Committee if she comes on—and some one has the pleasant task of writing to her to say that her name must be withdrawn. I say, they ought to return the thousand pounds!"

"You seem to think a Committee can be bought—like a penny bun!" said Lady Theodora angrily. "Why should we be forced to associate with a woman who has behaved like Caroline Wing?"

"Oh, you're on it, are you?—" the Duchess tied her bonnet-strings again with unnecessary energy—"well, it is a good thing I refused to let them put me on, for I should have fought you all! I can see some reason for not asking Caroline Wing to dinner—on the Barbary apes' ground—but none at all for not putting her on a charitable committee. Oh, you Pharisees!—you Pharisees!" And the Duchess shook her finger as she rose from her seat, in her sister-in-law's face.

Lady Theodora stood rigid.

"How do you know she isn't behaving in the same way now?" she said, slowly. "What's all this talk about Lord Melton?"

"Moonshine, my dear, moonshine! Now, if you were to ask what that minx Madge Whitton was about, there might be some sense in you!"

"If a woman has been unfaithful herself, what can she expect?"

"Oh, go to, go to!" cried the Duchess angrily. "Your mind is all topsy-turvy, Theodora. If Melton proposes for one of my daughters, I shall jump at him. And for the future I don't intend to ask Madge Whitton to dinner. When a woman accepts money and motor-cars from a man, she may be virtuous—but, personally, I don't care whether she is or not!"

"How do you know she accepts them?"

"How do you know Lord Melton makes love to Carrie? Well, well, let me go before we quarrel, You're a good soul, Theodora, but when you get on morals I want to make a clean sweep of the Ten Commandments. Good-bye. Good-bye!—No good asking for the car. And don't bother about a taxi. I'm going home by bus."

"Bus?" Lady Theodora stared at the notion.

But the stout and shabby woman was already at the door, from which she turned to deliver a final shaft.

"*Bus*, Theodora! You and Alec Wing, between you, are bringing 'the people' on us as fast as you can. So I'm trying to make friends with the people a bit, before the crash comes. Good night. Good night!"

Her sister-in-law was left to reflect that the Duchess was becoming more eccentric than ever, and that the Duke—who did not count, and was scarcely ever seen by the outer world—and the Duchess's daughters, ought really to restrain her.

After a few minutes' profound meditation on this theme, Lady Theodora drew her writing-case towards her, with a sigh, ran through some letters in it, and penned the following herself—

"DEAR LADY CHARLOTTE,—You ask my advice in this very painful matter of Lady Wing and the Royal Hospital League. I cannot of course answer for what others may think right, but *I*—personally—could never sit on a Committee with poor Lady Wing. Her conduct has been too flagrant, and her example too shocking. However, you and I and others who feel strongly on the subject may have great difficulty in convincing the Committee. A pretty woman, who is also a very rich woman, can always find friends. We must hope for the best, keep our forces together, and of course be ready to resign *en bloc* if we are beaten. Could you look in on me to-morrow morning? Naturally I hate taking action, as Alec Wing is my nephew, and I used to be very fond of him. But there are things more sacred than relationships. It is of course a difficulty that we allowed Lord Wing to give us so much money a little while ago. But he made no conditions, and we are not bound to admit Lady Wing because her husband

did what, after all, is only his public duty. All Lord Wing's relations—at any rate, a good many of them—feel very keenly the scandal of the way in which he and she are trying to thrust themselves on London—through all this entertaining and display. It is not easy for *us* to stand up against it. But if we care for principle at all, it has to be done.

“Yours very sincerely,

“THEODORA WEBB.”

“P.S.—We can go through the names of the Committee to-morrow. I think I can tell you something about most of them.”

Lady Theodora laid her pen down, and in the darkness of the February afternoon, gave herself again to meditation, with her feet on the fender. She was recalling that agreeable season four years before this date, when her eldest daughter, Milly, had been presented, and had enjoyed an amount of social success which had never fallen to her or her sister since. Milly had had a moment of beauty, which had quickly passed indeed; but in that moment of beauty there had been some “talk” about her and her cousin Alec Wing. Who knows what might have come of it, but for “that woman”? And now Milly was restless to go and study music at Dresden; she did not trouble about her clothes; and no longer cared about young men. In a few years she would be plain and faded. She had no money, and no one knew better than Lady Theodora how exacting were the demands of such young men as Milly was likely to meet.

Lady Theodora gave an angry poke to the fire, then rose, and rang for the butler to put her letter in the post.

Meanwhile London—the London that attends to such things—was bubbling with excitement on the subject of the new campaign. Wing's speech on the Address in the House of Lords had made it clear indeed that the young man had some formidable qualities. Parliament, in both Houses, sets high store now, as always, by youth, manners and good looks. None of these things will ultimately avail a man who turns out to be a fool. But granted a moderate amount of wits, they tell heavily. Wing had undoubtedly wits; and the spectacle he presented, as he rose from the back benches on the Opposition side to pour a good-humoured but none the less damaging fire into the flank of his own party, was one that pleased the eyes of the old Conservatives lounging on the benches opposite, most of whom had been very well acquainted with his father. "Damned handsome fellow!" said the Lord Chancellor to his neighbour, "and a remarkable voice. I shouldn't wonder if he gave Washington trouble."

And indeed it was soon evident that the handsome fellow was determined if possible to give trouble. The new party paper, which was launched the week after its owner's maiden speech, did not in its first number so much attack the Liberal party chiefs as handle them with a light irreverence which amused the town. Durrant, pondering the number in a corner of the Carlton, perceived Lewson come in, and went up to him, paper in hand.

"It's good fun—but I don't see how it's going to upset Washington."

"How do you know that the owner wants to upset Washington?" asked Sir Wilfrid with a smile.

Durrant stared.

"What do you mean? As I read it, Alec would sell his soul to upset Washington."

"Up to a certain point. But if Washington were too seriously damaged, where would Alec's chances be?"

"I see. Well, it's a difficult game. I understand the new editor—Donovan—is a clever beast?"

"Your *language*, my dear Jim! All I can say is that Alec is delighted with him, that Lady Wing doesn't much take to him, and that his plans for the whole campaign are at any rate colossally expensive."

"That won't matter to Alec. Well, we shall see," said Durrant dubiously, as he walked away. Leaving the club he proceeded by St. James's Street to Eltham House, pondering as he went.

He wondered in the first place how Miss Allen was getting on.

He had not arrived at calling that young lady Joyce yet, even in his thoughts, though he had known for some time that he was most solidly and unchangeably attached to her. And indeed she had given him no excuse whatever for "Christian-naming" for, after a first period of growing friendship between them, based on a common affection for Caroline Wing, Miss Allen had suddenly altered her manner towards the young officer. Her girlish frankness and fun which combined so agreeably with the touch of religious strictness in her character, had passed into a general reserve which seemed impenetrable, and had altogether taken the shine out of Durrant's autumn and winter. He knew very well that she had neither birth nor money; and that if she were to consent to marry him he would have to face his family in arms. But he happened to want to marry her intensely; in the constant familiarity of Eltham House; during the preceding summer, her freshness, her innocent uprightness, her sweetness had stolen his heart before he knew where he was. He was quite

aware that being well-born, moderately well off, and an officer in the Household troops, he might have married either for money, or for rank, whichever he pleased; but he had observed among his acquaintances a number of unsatisfactory marriages which seemed to have been made for those reasons; and as for himself, if he married, he was determined to be happy. And being of a simple and loyal nature underneath his man-of-the-worldishness, he desired nothing better on his part than to make Joyce Allen happy. Moreover, although there had never been a trace of flirting on Joyce's part with him, or with anybody else in the Eltham House circle, there had been delightful weeks in the summer when their relations had seemed—to the young man, at any rate—to be running smoothly on to a golden end.

And then Joyce had suddenly withdrawn herself behind the gentlest and most impenetrable shell. What had happened? Some impertinence of Alec's? From a hint or two in that quarter, of which the captain had preferred to take no notice, he had realised that Wing was on the alert, and in a hostile spirit. If he had dared to say anything, to suggest anything to Joyce herself, it would be like his insolence!

Durrant's opinion of his cousin, indeed, had been steadily worsening ever since Wing's accession to the title. Wing appeared to him, as to Oliver Lewson, to be suffering from a kind of intoxication by his own wealth; and the nakedness of his present bid for power through his money offended and disgusted the young officer. In many quarters he heard vaguely of poor men being nobbled by Alec, such men as were at all likely to help his ambitions. Durrant suspected that money had been lent, on the easiest possible terms, to various men in Parliament, even in office; and where circumstances made any direct money transaction

undesirable or impossible, there were a thousand ways in which the great Wing fortune, involving investments over half the world, could be made useful to a friend.

"Dirty work!" thought Durrant indignantly. "He thinks, I bet, that he's going to buy himself into Washington's Government! He's probably trusting more to that than to his precious newspaper. We shall see!"

So cogitating he found himself walking up to the door of Eltham House, and enquiring for Lady Wing. The footman said that she was not at home, and Durrant was turning away from the inner hall where he had been writing a message on his card, when he perceived Wing accompanied by a stranger walking towards the hall along the corridor leading to the west wing. Wing at the same moment saw his cousin, and hailed him.

"Hullo, Jim, where are you off to? Carrie's out—a matinee or something. Let me introduce you to Mr. Donovan—our new editor."

Durrant turned unwillingly, and shook hands with a tall bald-headed man, possessed of piercing black eyes, hanging cheeks, full lips and a muddy complexion.

"I've just been looking at your first number," he said, speaking to Alec rather than to the editor, whose aspect he disliked.

"Not *my* first number!" interrupted Mr. Donovan, with a smile—in which he showed too much gum and too many teeth for Durrant's taste. "I shall only be responsible from next week. Oh, the first number is very well—very well, indeed, considering—but we must bring some rather heavier guns to bear. In time, my dear sir, in time, we shall do everything."



"Well, you haven't got very much time," said Durrant bluntly. "I hear Washington's going to turn us out on the Budget. Seven or eight weeks, I suppose. You can't do much in that time."

"Oh, we can make a very fair splash," said Donovan cheerfully. "Our business is to be personal—very *personal!*" And he looked with twinkling eyes at Wing.

Wing nodded. "If we can't take the shine out of some of the nobodies on our side, who've got to the front, God knows how—before Washington forms his Government, we shall only come in to be kicked out after a few months. We're going for new blood, aren't we, Donovan?" He smiled triumphantly, his hands on his sides, his fair curls and ruddy countenance lighting up the shadows of the hall. Durrant thought—"Ah, but who's going to turn the nobodies out to put you in?" Yet his irritation must admit that Alec Wing, as he stood there, towering over Donovan and himself, was a splendid apparition—a young god going forth to battle. He was in the full excitement and exultation of its beginning, tasting sensations hitherto unknown to him, and confident of success.

"Well then—till to-morrow!" said Wing, dismissing his new editor with a gracious nod. "I think we've done all our business for to-day. Don't go, Jim. Come into my den and have a smoke."

Durrant rather unwillingly agreed. To his astonishment he discovered, as he followed his cousin, that Wing's den was now the beautiful small library on the ground floor, one of the few rooms in the costly house that Durrant, who cared little for works of art, and thought scorn of overgrown magnificence, honestly admired. Its delicate emptiness, the perfection and grace of its decoration, the charm of its latticed books,

always produced a soothing impression on him. He liked to see Caroline receiving in it her choicest company. But as he crossed the threshold he exclaimed in dismay—

“Goodness, Alec, what have you been doing to this room?”

For the latticed bookcases with their rows of mellowed books, and the wall-arabesques between the cases, together with the refined Georgian furniture—tables, cabinets, and chairs—were all snowed under by a recent accumulation of books, maps, pamphlets, blue books; the litter of the rising politician. Charts and diagrams on various sociological matters—“Housing Reform”—“Cost of Living”—“Congested Areas”—and so forth, hung untidily from drawing-pins driven into the carved frames of the book-cases; a typewriter, and a pile of MS. on one table, had been hastily left by Wing’s secretary on the arrival of Mr. Donovan; while on another, an open box of cigars between two chairs, showed where the young employer had just been sitting in conference with the famous—or notorious—journalist who was to help him to the storming of London.

“What was the good of the room before!” said Wing complacently. “It suits me better than my father’s old library—a dismal hole!—so I have annexed it.”

“It was such a perfect thing,” murmured Durrant, looking round him, “and you had twenty others to choose from.”

“Don’t be an ass, old fellow!” cried Wing, slapping him on the shoulder. “Whatever does the room matter? Sit down and have a talk. There are a few cigars left. I tell you that fellow Donovan’s a marvel!—we’re going to make Washington smart.” And

standing on the hearthrug, with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, he began to pour out his plans for the coming months, evidently delighted to find a listener, intelligent, yet of not too much importance, who would let him run on.

Accordingly he did run on, while Durrant smoked and listened, throwing in occasionally a caustic word or two, the chief effect of which was to let loose more talk. The mind of the young soldier was in some astonishment as he listened. Since when had Alec developed this craze for politics? He was no doubt a budding orator at Eton, and his speaking at Oxford during his undergraduate days had made a stir, and not only among his University contemporaries. It was always understood that he was going into Parliament, and he had been actually adopted for a north country constituency, before that journey to Florence, which had decided his life and Caroline Marsworth's. As soon as the divorce was made public, the local association had sent him about his business; and then, for two years, the political world had known nothing of Alec Wing.

And now—did the fellow suppose he was going to carry the whole position by storm! Durrant was not brilliant, and generally—with Alec—inarticulate. But he had a shrewd headpiece of his own, and a considerable quiet knowledge of men and affairs. No doubt, Alec's speech in the Lords had been a success—a great success. So much was apparently proved by the newspaper headlines; though Durrant suspected that the size of the print was partly due to that other and more picturesque side of Lord Wing's career of which the papers said nothing. And it was evident that Alec had been spending the whole of the first part of the winter in laying foundations for his campaign; while

the estates had been handed over to Lewson, and Caroline had been doing her best to grapple with the houses and their contents.

But what was it all aiming at? And why such rush and hurry? Durrant put the questions—not without sarcasm.

"My dear fellow!" laughed Alec—"it's very simple what I'm aiming at. I mean to force Washington to give me office—I don't care what—the smallest foothold will do. But I'm putting up a fight for my career. Of course"—he added hastily—"I believe in the principles we're advocating in the paper; I'm a convinced supporter of them. But I shouldn't take all the trouble I am taking, and spend all the money I am spending, if it weren't that I'm determined to stand up against this damned cant and boycotting, which is driving a man like me out of public life—and will drive others out, if I don't fight it now."

Durrant took his cigar out of his mouth, and surveyed his cousin. "After all you did break what most people think a law—and a Divine law, too," he said dryly. "Can't you lie low till people have forgotten it?"

"Why should I?" said Wing, haughtily. "I have got my place in Parliament now,—in spite of Mrs. Washington and her gang. No one can dislodge me. I'd rather it were the House of Commons, but I can make do with the Lords. I'm going to *fight*; and, like other people, I'm going to spend money. They'll have to come to terms. To think of the duffers on our front bench!"

He turned round with a scornful gesture, and flung the remains of his cigarette into the fire.

"Does it ever occur to you that you'll draw the enemies' fire not only on yourself, but—on Lady

Wing?" said Durrant after a pause. "She'll have a pretty hot time of it as well as you. You know what the baser sort of party newspapers are. It doesn't seem to me that Caroline's been looking very strong lately."

"Carrie? She's a magnificent constitution!—" said Wing half annoyed, half smiling—"stand anything!—especially for my sake!"

"No doubt. But she's been hard at it since last April. One way or another she's been fighting your battles ever since she set foot in this house. Does she ever have an evening alone? She's always talking and entertaining, always making plans. She never gets a moment's rest. The notes she writes!—I've seen the piles of them. It's a dog's life, I consider!" said the young man warmly.

"Why, Carrie loves it! It's what she's made for. She was born to hold a *salon*—and, by George! she does it rippingly! What else is left to her, I should like to know, by these prudes that boycott her? Carrie—like Italy—*fara da se*. She'll make this house as famous as any of the great *salons*—Holland House—the whole lot of them—before she's done. She needn't step out of her drawing-rooms, to know all the London she wants to know; and all the foreigners too."

Durrant's countenance relaxed. So, after all, Caroline was appreciated. He had often, of late, accused Alec in his thoughts of neglect and even unkindness towards a wife, who, in the young soldier's opinion, was infinitely superior to him.

He replied with greatly increased cordiality—

"She does it magnificently indeed. But it's a strain."

"Oh, no, my dear fellow—not at all, to a woman with such a gift for it!" Then after a pause Wing

added in a reflective tone—"The growth of English Pharisaism is to me the most extraordinary phenomenon! The women—poor things!—used to suffer in the old days as they do now, if they chose to follow their hearts, and flout society; but the men at least were let alone. Nobody tried to mix up morals and politics a hundred years ago—for *men*; unless, of course, there was open scandal going on. But nowadays!—these Dissenting prigs and asses!—"

He threw back his handsome head with passion, as though he flung defiance at the crew.

Durrant stiffened again, as he rose.

"Well, you wouldn't wish that kind of thing back again!—would you?—when the woman bore all the brunt. Good heavens!"

He looked, frowning, for his hat. Wing flushed.

"I don't follow you, Jim! It's the confusing a man's private life with his public affairs that I'm out to stop."

"And because a woman has no public affairs, she must submit to be cut and cold-shouldered—take it as the natural thing—while her husband's in the Cabinet, and goes everywhere. Is that what you suggest?"

"What nonsense you talk, Jim!" said Wing, beginning to lose his temper under what he now felt to be the hostile attitude of his cousin. "But after all, it's not a matter we can discuss," he added, with offended dignity.

"Certainly not. I didn't mean to be impertinent," said Durrant hastily. He was not at all anxious to quarrel, and he felt that he had gone too far. "Of course, it's beastly for you both—I know that—and I wish you luck. Well, now I'll just run up and see if Carrie's come in, before I go."

He went upstairs. In the yellow drawing-room,

where the lights were being put on, he saw a girlish figure in the distance, and recognised Joyce Allen. She was "tidying"—performing one of those small yet priceless services that only delicate and fastidious women can render to a house. Flowers, books, newspapers, all the litter of life, fell into order at her touch. Durrant advanced slowly, delighting in the movements of her pretty figure and capable hands.

"Is Lady Wing coming in?" he asked her, as they greeted.

"I hope so!" the girl's tone was anxious. "I begged her to come in and rest before dinner. There's a large dinner-party, and she'll have to talk for hours."

"I can't think how she stands it," said Durrant. "Mayn't I help you in putting these books away?"

"Oh, it's done," said Joyce, and then seeing that he did not intend to go away, she quite composedly, though with heightened colour, seated herself, and prepared to entertain him.

"I've heard a horrid thing to-day," said the young man abruptly. "I wonder—can we do anything?"

"What have you heard?" said Joyce, sitting up, with eyes instantly alert.

"I have a sister on the Committee of the Royal Hospital League—Mrs. Mallon—you know her—she comes here sometimes."

"Oh!" cried Joyce, with a note of pain.

"Ah, you've heard! It's abominable! There's been the most appalling row. But they've carried it. My sister and two others have resigned. It's that old cat Lady Theodora's doing, as much as anybody's!"

Joyce Allen suddenly put her hands over her eyes.

"She *minded*"—her voice shook—"she minded so much."

"Lady Wing? When did she hear?"

"This afternoon before she went out. One of the ladies who resigned, wrote to her—a kind letter—an awfully nice letter. There was a regular debate upon it! It was *dreadful* to Carrie to think that she had been discussed by all those people—as if she had wanted to force herself on them—and then rejected. And she was planning all the things she would do for the League. It had made her so happy!"

"It's devilish!" said Durrant heartily.

Joyce was silent. She sat looking straight before her, with a sad and troubled face. "If one could only protect her from these things!" she said, in a low voice—apparently to herself.

"It was awfully plucky of her to go last week—to the opening of Parliament," said Durrant, after a pause, also in lowered tones. He was most genuinely sorry for Caroline, and angrily on her side—in spite of his strict, Scotch religion—against a world of "old cats." But perhaps his dominant feeling at the moment was acute pleasure and surprise in finding himself thus admitted to Joyce Allen's confidence; allowed to share her feelings about her cousin. It was long indeed since she had allowed him any such intimacy. And he suddenly had the impression as of some long strain of sympathy and pity, which had broken down the girl's reserve, and made her stretch out her hand—metaphorically—to a friend of whom she was sure. His heart throbbed with joy, and he longed to tell her that he would do anything in the world he could—to serve her first—and Caroline next.

At his mention of the opening of Parliament, he saw her shrink. She turned her frank grey eyes, which made such a pleasant combination with her reddish gold hair, upon him, hesitated—and then—as though she could not help herself—broke out—



"She had a *horrid* time! At the opening itself, nobody spoke to her, though she was quite close to two or three people she used to know very well, before—"

"Before the crash?"

Joyce nodded. "Then in the evening when Lord Wing spoke, she and the Duchess went back to the House together. She was awfully proud of his speech! But——"

She paused again. Durrant waited for her. She went on timidly—her eyes filled with tears—

"I—I think people—women—behaved even worse to her than at the opening. Many men came up to her, and congratulated her; even those Lord Wing had been attacking. But not a single woman spoke to her; and in the evening—there were two or three horrible letters—anonymous letters—and newspapers——"

"Pigs!" said Durrant hotly.

"It's this story of little Dick—Dick's death—that people are so cruel about. And I know—I *know*—it isn't true!" cried Joyce, sitting upright with her hands round her knees, a vision of indignant pity.

"Tell me what you know," said Durrant peremptorily. "Tell me what you know."

Joyce looked at him doubtfully a moment, then yielded to the warm kindness in his eyes, and told him—the story which she and her father had heard from one of the two eye-witnesses of Caroline's agony in the Val d'Aosta.

Durrant listened carefully, made a few notes on the back of a letter, returned the notes to his pocket, and then rose to take his departure.

"Thank you. I shall make that useful. Now look here. You and I are allies in this business. I don't know why you've been sending me to Coventry all this time——"

"Oh, no!" cried Joyce, putting out protesting hands.

"You have," said Durrant firmly, catching one of the hands. "I'll make you tell me why, some day. But now we're allies; we're going to look after Lady Wing. She'll have a tough time of it. All the enemies Wing makes in politics—and he'll make bushels—will try to take it out of her—I mean the big-wigs, and their wives. Never mind. We'll stand body-guard. That's a bargain! And don't send me to Coventry again—I won't stand it!"

Whereupon before she could stop him he kissed her hand. Then with a joyous, triumphant look at her, repeated from the doorway, he turned and went.

"What have I been doing?" thought Joyce, standing bewildered where he had left her. And sitting down by the fire in her own room, whither she had fled for refuge—trembling under the shock of feelings she had repressed and trampled on for months—she tried to think it out.

## CHAPTER XIV

THOSE who loved Caroline Wing—and by this time, in spite of her exclusion from a large section of the social world, she had made many friends in London who were not only the friends of her wealth—could never look back upon the hurried weeks of this eventful spring without bitterness of heart. They knew they had been watching something at once tragic and beautiful, without realising the tragedy or the beauty; like some moment of nature, some exquisite light of sunset or dawn, some spring or autumn scene which we have never really *felt* till it was gone. What made the tragedy and the beauty? Nothing but the gradual development of a woman's spiritual nature amid surroundings that might have seemed to stunt and degrade it. Caroline during these months was a disappointed lover, wounded to the core by the growing indifference and coolness of the man she adored; she was a starved mother, separated from the children she had already borne, and with no hope of others; she was made for the best in society, with rich gifts that only asked to spend themselves on friends and kinsfolk, and those she could have loved, those by whom she wished to be loved, women, of course, especially, turned away from her time after time in indignation or contempt; while hundreds of others with whom she had nothing in common, whose ways and modes of thought disgusted or repelled her, crowded officiously round her, hailing her

as a flag-bearer in the fight for sexual freedom, and applauding her as one who had braved the forces of law and society on behalf of a woman's right to break the marriage bond when it had ceased to satisfy her, and to follow passion wherever it might lead. But in truth Caroline Wing was no conscious and deliberate rebel. Quite the contrary. Like any other weak woman of strong emotions, she had been conquered by a great passion which had given her for a time great happiness; but there was that in her all the while—inherited forces, compunctions and traditions—which steadily reappeared, like sediment in calming water, as life went on.

Yet she fought these compunctions steadily. She went on her proud way, and did her best to fulfil the brilliant and yet futile rôle that her father-in-law, by his gift of Eltham House to the ostracised couple, had imposed upon her. And there were many times when youth and vanity and excitement told her that all was well; that Alec would come back to her with the old devotion when his political campaign was over; that some day when she was less tired and driven, the child on whom Lord Wing had warned her so much might turn, would be given to them; and that, meanwhile, life was amusing and triumphant enough, in spite of social shocks and rebuffs. She would have been less than human, less than woman, if she had not—intermittently—exulted in the splendour of Eltham House, and found a creative pleasure in the remodelling and adorning of the two or three country "places" in England and Scotland, out of Lord Wing's miscellany, where she and Alec had elected to live. There were times when it bored her to spend time and thought upon her dress; and other times when she would spend feverish days with her dressmaker, and delight in outshining other women; generally, if the cause could have been tracked,

because of a look or a word of Alec's, in careless praise or blame. And she had begun to find a new amusement and enjoyment in "charity"—the giving of large sums of money, and watching what happened to them.

But nevertheless she was at bottom one with the fretful child who "disliked the things he disliked more than he liked the things he liked." The slings and arrows of Fortune hurt more than her gifts pleased. What a proud and sensitive woman went through, this second year, in braving London, on so large a scale, only Joyce knew. The day of the opening of Parliament remained in the minds of both as a day of nightmare, though Caroline had spoken of it, even to her cousin, with difficulty. When would she ever forget the moment of the entry of the Royal procession, when, as the brilliant ranks of the peeresses in their shimmering plumes rose to greet it, the first look of the women to her right and left was for the Royalties, and the splendid figures behind them carrying the traditional emblems of the English monarchy—regalia, sword, cap of maintenance, orb, sceptre, and the rest; and the second look, swift, furtive, piercing, was for the wife, standing erect and pale beside them, whose husband, instead of filling his hereditary post among the king's attendant "thegns" was ostentatiously yawning and smiling on the farther side of the red and gold chamber, in the back-bench ranks of the Opposition?

Caroline's spirit had risen under the challenge. She turned and looked several of her neighbours quietly in the face; then she threw a nod and a smile to Alec across the moving throng—grandees, heralds, bishops in white sleeves, soldiers in glittering uniforms, the Beef-eaters with their Tudor doublets and staves—which

filled the floor of the House; and finally she tried to listen to the King's speech, which every political ear in that glittering crowd was craning to catch. But in truth she heard nothing of it. Her mind was in a whirl of mockery and defiance. She was thinking of a famous page of sarcasm in Carlyle, a piece of *diablerie* which she remembered from her schoolroom days, when, at seventeen, she cherished an adoration for an elderly tutor of Queen's, who was coaching her in history, and had given her "Sartor Resartus" for a Christmas present. To please him, she had learnt pages of it by heart, slept with it under her pillow, declaimed "The Everlasting Yea," and generally behaved, as her grandmother might have behaved half a century before, when Carlyle was the fashion. And now, how the mocking words sprang out in memory, under the heat of coincidence!

"Society which the more I think of it, astonishes me the more, is founded upon *clothes!* . . . Often in my atrabiliar moods when I read of pompous ceremonies, Frankfurt Coronations, Royal Drawing-rooms, Levees—and how the ushers and macers and pursuivants are all in waiting; how Duke this is presented by Archduke that, and Colonel A. by General B., and innumerable Bishops, Admirals, and miscellaneous Functionaries, are advancing gallantly to the Anointed Presence; and I strive in my remote privacy to form a clear picture of that solemnity,—on a sudden, as by some enchanter's wand, the—shall I speak of it?—*the Clothes fly off the whole dramatic corps!* . . . Imagination, clothed as in mephitic air, recoils on itself, and will not forward with the picture.—What would Majesty do could such an accident befall in reality—should buttons all simultaneously start, and the solid wool evaporate, in very deed, as here in dream!

Ach Gott! How each skulks into the nearest hiding-place—their high State Tragedy become a pickle-herring Farce to weep at,—the whole fabric of Government, Legislature, Property, Police, civilised society dissolves, in wails and howls.”

She looked again at her neighbours to the right and left. They were now absorbed in the spectacle. But she felt herself master of it. What did it matter to her?

Ah!—but the cool inner mind bided its time; and before the King’s speech was done, reflection had thrown a quieting dust on Caroline’s swarming thoughts.

“‘Pickle-herring Farce’? Perhaps! But the world to which you belong without escape has taken advantage of this particular ‘Farce,’ to make a demonstration—against you—and the man you love; to inflict punishment on you—and him. And it hurts. You know it hurts. All the same—brave it!—show nothing!”

And as far as she could remember, she had shown nothing. After the ceremony, as she pushed her way through the lobbies towards the outer doors, amid a throng of peeresses and politicians, she found herself again entirely alone, without a friend. The Duchess had promised to accompany her, and had gone to bed with a cold instead. No one, through the whole function, had looked at her, no one had spoken to her. Suddenly, she passed a great mirror set in the wall, and was aware of a stately and beautiful vision in black satin, white plumes, and a blaze of diamonds. Herself! A throb of defiance ran through her. Her own beauty rallied her nerves, gave her back self-confidence—even moral strength. If indeed she looked like that, no one could say that she had given ground by an inch!

Later, in the evening, when all the fine clothes were gone, when serious business was forward, and the first night of the debate, including Alec's speech, was over, Caroline emerged once more into the outer lobby of the House of Lords, but thrilling this time with triumph and emotion. How well he had spoken! How perfectly he had managed his voice—his gesticulation! Ah!—there he was, coming to meet her!

"Well, darling!—how do you think it went?"

"Oh, Alec!—it was *splendid!*"

"You little goose! All the same I think it got them! They say Washington's very angry. Let him be! Did you see him in the House? Some of the fellows on the other side have been congratulating me like fun. The papers will have it *verbatim*. I say!—you look ripping!"

And in his exultation he had seized her hand under her opera cloak and pressed it for a moment in the crowd. And then he was gone, to speak to a journalist, bidding her go home. And she had pressed on through the crowd, happy, passionately happy, because he had looked at her—had spoken to her so. How right he had been to take his own course—to venture everything—to scout all the prudent counsels of the wise men! This was life—adventure—the joy of battle! It would make a great man of him, in whose success she could lose herself; it would bring back their first enchanted days of perfect oneness, perfect love.

"Ah! Lady Wing! Congratulate you! Your husband has made a capital speech!"

So said man after man, catching sight of her on her way to the entrance.

Caroline shone upon them in return.

But what was that? A face of a woman, turning



round on the steps of St. Stephen's entrance to look for a companion. . . .

Caroline saw the face, and gave a gasp of pleasure. She recognised a school friend whom she had not seen for years—a charming Scottish girl, married to a Scottish peer, to whom in the days when Caroline had first appeared in London as John Marsworth's wife she had been warmly attached. They had shared the common interests natural to young mothers; had advised each other, helped each other, praised each other's children and fought each other's foes. Then Lady Dunkeld had gone to India with her husband; Carrie had lost sight of her; and after the crash Carrie had written one letter—and waited in vain for an answer.

"Emmie!" She found herself calling, standing on tip-toe to wave to the woman ahead.

And the pretty blue eyes saw her; a visible tremor ran through the soft features; and without a sign of recognition, Lady Dunkeld looked her old friend in the face—and turned away.

Caroline entered the car, and drove home, like a person half stunned. *Emmie!*—Emmie Dunkeld! She could see herself in bed, and Lady Dunkeld sitting beside her—with a white bundle on her knee. And her throat contracted, as she thought—"She was always so fond of Dicky!"

Nor had that been the end of that day's emotions. She remembered Joyce's ministrations all that evening, and how she had puzzled the dear, tender child by her alternations of a mood which was now greedy of congratulations and wildly confident of good days coming, and now bitterly restless and silent, as though some secret thought turned everything to gall. With the last post that night there had come a rush of letters:

—congratulations from a number of the Eltham House *habitues*, her old friend the French Ambassador, for instance, a score of men in both Houses of Parliament, who cared indeed very little for Alec Wing's success, but cared a great deal that the charming mistress of Eltham House should find pleasure in it; Robert Llewellyn, also, who wrote a criticism of the speech, candid, but full of kindness—the kindness of the veteran to the youth; dwelling on its merits of delivery and arrangement—"a voice to be envied"—"the points clear"—"the jests new"—"altogether a great success!"—"though, of course, fundamentally, you won't expect one of the Old Guard like me to agree with any of its main propositions. I dispute every one of them! But what does that matter? A great success, I repeat!—and Washington adds his congratulations to mine."

A letter which she had put down with a sharp sense of comfort, and a grateful vision of the possibilities of friendship—pure and disinterested—between men and women. Then, what evil chance had made her open the next letter in the pile which had been given her?—a note delivered by hand, and brought up, so Joyce said, by the butler, only ten minutes before her own arrival at home. She had read it at first without understanding it, in a kind of languid half-consciousness; for the emotions of the day had tired her out. Then again—and again.

Of course only a woman could have written such a letter!—could have put such quintessence of malice into words and on paper. It had been evidently written in haste by a spectator of the debate in the Lords; someone who, to private reasons for disliking and despising Alec and Caroline Wing, joined political fury with a man attacking *her* party, and so perhaps endangering the interests of a husband or a brother. A

good deal of Alec's speech had consisted of sarcasm at the expense of the younger "nobodies" who formed a court round Washington, and were reckoning on the minor seats in his Government. No doubt, a wife or a sister of one of them! For a moment, indeed, Caroline had thought "Elizabeth Washington!"—and then in a flash knew that for such a woman to have written such a letter was impossible.

What matter who wrote it! It fell from Caroline's hands, and her head dropped against the back of the chair. Joyce, looking round, astonished at the sudden silence, saw that she was half fainting. . . . When she had shaken off her weakness, and was sitting with her hand in Joyce's, Caroline let a few broken words escape her. "It was an anonymous letter, dear!—horrible!—burn it, please." And Joyce had burnt it, beside herself with wrath, and sympathy; but asking no questions.

Then she had helped her cousin to bed. But Caroline had quickly dismissed both her and the maid; to lie sleepless and feverish, waiting for Alec, her brain haunted by the phrases of the mean, scurrilous letter, which seemed to strip their victim of every rag of seemliness or self-respect, to leave her naked in a world of enemies.

And as she lay there, two things happened. The first was—she made up her mind that she would never tell Alec a word of the letter—or a word of the meeting with Lady Dunkeld. Probably mere delusion, that last!—something imagined, not seen. And anyway, all such things she would bear alone. No need to worry him with them.

And the second thing that happened, as she lay there storm-beaten in the spacious room, through which the firelight flickered, was a sudden invasion of the

whole mind by a marvellous sense of companionship—of help—of lightening and raising up—flooding the whole being.

She sprang up in a kind of ecstasy, stretching out her hands to the darkness—"What was it? Who art Thou?"

And nothing answered. Only the February wind went sighing round the house, and in the distance the Abbey bell struck midnight. But as she sank back again on her pillow, half sobbing—the pain and bitterness had gone. She lay like a child—depending on—clinging to—she knew not what. When Alec came in, elate and excited, brimming over with the gossip of his club, he found her eagerly waiting for him, all smiles and triumphant sympathy. And she, hungrily watching for the old devotion, the old words and looks, that had made her life a heaven, was only too ready to mistake his satisfaction with the praises she poured on him for that return she longed for. The promise of that ineffable moment seemed to her fulfilled.

And that moment was the first of others. . . . She began to be secretly haunted—waylaid—by that Presence which pursues Man's soul. To perceive it, to thrill to it, is itself a natural gift, or capacity. And for the first time in her life she began to discover that she possessed it.

Strange that such a gift should have revealed itself in those days of constant effort and turmoil, of a fight that grew hotter and hotter as the weeks passed. Carrie threw herself into her husband's campaign with all the energy, all the ability of which she was capable. She wrote for him; she hunted up books and references for him; she accompanied him through a round of public meetings in the North, by which Alec enormously increased his fame as a speaker, and where the handsome

couple were the objects of endless talk and curiosity, of angry attacks, or excited support. Wing's State Socialism grew more and more advanced; and the astonishing experiments he was beginning to make with his London property rang through the press. At the same time he was a Protectionist—on Trade Union principles—and a passionate advocate of national strength by land and sea. He soon developed all the popular arts, could tell a story admirably; meet violence with a triumphant good humour; and give charm and savour to the oldest tags. In the Lords he spoke again and again, gaining force with every attack on his own side. The Government were visibly weakening; the Opposition divided and anxious. The avowed object of the Wing group was to infuse new blood into the ranks of the coming Liberal Government, and force some portion at least of an unauthorised programme on the Liberal leader.

Llewellyn through it all showed an unmoved aspect. He generally managed to find his way to Eltham House on Friday evening when the House of Commons was not sitting, and there he met all Wing's sallies and gibes with the sly and smiling composure which suited his snub-nosed, shrewd-eyed countenance.

To watch Alec Wing during these months, indeed, was to see in him a kind of "Lucifer fallen from heaven," and striving with might and main to climb back into "the shining place" that should have been his. English political life has always lain open to the assaults of youth, audacity, and brains. The careers of "Dizzy," Randolph Churchill, and of others still living are there to prove it. That a man should be reckless and violent, if he is also young and full of wits, is all to the good in English politics. Men watch and talk, open-mouthed; and to be hated is as useful as to be loved. Very soon

indeed the new Lord Wing, by his speeches in the Lords and the country, and the exploits of his editor, Donovan, driving the freebooting coach of *The New Gazette*—became names of scandal and fury in thousands of decent households. The peculiarities—personal and political—of the Opposition leaders were mercilessly chaffed. Washington's "lion head," and the flattery of it in the official Liberal press; Llewellyn now as the Menelaus, now as the Socrates of the party; Washington's anxious courting of the Dissenters, and uneasy haunting of their "tabernacles"; Lord T—caressing the British workman in public, and cursing him in private; the colossal ignorance of S— proved by a most skilful series of extracts from the luckless man's speeches over ten years; the inconsistency of D— who in playing his many parts had never taken Melbourne's advice to his Cabinet—"It doesn't matter what we say, but damn it, let's all say the same!"; this man's platform tricks, or that man's luxurious habits:—the *New Gazette* made daily mock of them all. And as anger grew, so also laughter; and that chuckling delight natural to Englishmen, in the mere impishness and malice of the new campaign.

Then in March came the long expected Budget. Down to the House of Commons went the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, and in one night the edifice of English Free Trade fell crashing to the ground.

"We shall beat them," said Llewellyn to Washington as they walked away from the House together—"by the skin of our teeth. But they'll be back again in a year, and they'll carry their Bill!"

But meanwhile—and the Tories were quite prepared for it—their defeat was certain. The day and the hour of it were calculated to the minute, and already the

candidates for office were beginning to sit on the Liberal doorstep.

"I shall ask nothing, write nothing!" said Wing triumphantly to Caroline. "Let them come to me. The question is—Can they carry on, with our men barking at their heels? I say *no*! Well, then, let them buy us off. A few minor offices—that's all we want—a foot in the doorway. They'll have to do it. You'll see!"

Would they?

The whole political world began to seethe with this question, and with the multitudinous answers to it, from the vehement "See them hanged first!"—of the enraged main body of the party, to the hesitating "Well, after all, why not?"—of those born to compromise.

Meanwhile Alec Wing went night after night to one or other of the big towns, expounding the Budget, supporting this, attacking that, always attended by a bodyguard of young speakers, and owing nothing to any party organisation. Money indeed was poured out like water, had been so poured out for six months; in the creation of a press and an organisation. But the money was Wing's, frankly, notoriously, Wing's; and he did as he pleased, owing no man obedience. It was a new form of the money-power in politics. There was no disguise about it, and there being many qualities in the political soil at that moment which suited it, it grew and flourished like a green bay tree.

And all this time Carrie followed in the wake of her buccaneer, tremulously, feverishly absorbed. All her vague terrors and jealousies on the subject of Madge Whitton were at this time laid to sleep. She never saw her, for Mrs. Whitton had ceased to show herself at Eltham House on the nights when it was open. Nor

had she any reason to think that Alec saw her. Certainly he never spoke of her.

Meanwhile, on the nights when Eltham House set wide the doors of its beautiful rooms, to receive a world which now contained the best foreign society of London, together with all the distinguished migrants of the moment from Paris, Rome, or New York, and a multitude of men, well born or plebeian, young and old, representing the brain-work of the country, its politics, journalism, and art, together with the pick of the public services, Caroline Wing was the sovereign of a large and ever-spreading court. Women were always in a small minority in it, mainly because of the social boycott that existed, but partly because men had somehow made a masculine thing of Caroline's salon, and men were more at home there than women. Men talked there as they talked with each other, or at their clubs—without mutes on the strings, only with a certain added zest and brilliancy, because of the beautiful woman who made the bond of this miscellaneous world, towards whom indeed a wonderful loyalty was growing up among them. Caroline—naturally—escaped neither adorers, nor scandal. But the adorers she laughed away; soon wooing them back to her, however, as friends, by virtue of a frank *camaraderie*, which seemed to say to them all without words—"What *do* you—what *can* you expect—of a woman who is in love with her husband!"

None of them indeed touched even the fringe of her heart—except Lord Melton. Him she often thought of; and always with pity, and a stirring of the pulse. The memory of that sudden outburst of his on the night before the opening of Parliament, when he had found her alone, in one of the deserted drawing-rooms, stayed with her, though in a dim dream-like way. She



knew that he could not escape his own Christian standards and traditions—that he judged her, while yet he fell at her feet. And that double fact it was which moved her. He had apparently the same vague premonitions of evil, of calamity, with regard to her, as she had sometimes about herself. That made him passionately want to protect and help her; while she knew very well, all the time, as a woman of the world, that she must not let him help her. But she clung to the thought of him in a wistful, perfectly innocent way. She wanted to be friends with him, as, but for politics, she would have been friends with Llewellyn. And she saw quite plainly that it could not be; and had never wavered in her decree of banishment.

But one morning—one cold, sunny morning—in the week before the critical divisions in the Budget Committee which were to determine the fate of the Tory Ministry, Caroline escaped for half an hour from the great house of which the size and magnificence had begun of late to fret nerves sorely strained, and went into the Park with only her favourite dachshund—not even Joyce—to keep her company. She wanted solitude, and the sting of frosty air. Walking rapidly westward, she soon found herself on the edge of the Serpentine, which was just filmed with ice and glistening with sun. It was too early for any but those who walked for business; she found herself practically alone, except for a figure of a man advancing from the distance, to which she paid no attention till the man was close upon her, so absorbed was she in the calculations of Alec's chances in the coming struggle.

Suddenly she raised her eyes and saw that the man approaching her was Melton. She recognised the tall loosely jointed figure, the small head, and drooping moustache. He had been aware of her for some minutes,

had had his chance of disappearing into a side path, and had, none the less, blindly come on.

As they met, she stopped, without any apparent hesitation, and they shook hands. In his face there was a rush of colour; on hers a rather timid smile.

"Are you out for a constitutional—like me? And like me—do you never own to such things?"

He explained that he was on his way to Brook Street to enquire after a brother who was ill. Caroline quietly turned and walked beside him.

The young man went red and white by turns. At one moment he trod on air; the next it stabbed him to perceive the changes wrought by sheer stress and haste of living in the woman who interested him so deeply. The face was paler, the cheeks and temples thinner, and there were fresh lines, though infinitely delicate, round eyes and mouth. The effect was of a loveliness more human and touching—less Juno-like, less triumphant. "She has been working herself to death for that fellow!" he thought indignantly—"and when he comes to grief, as he will, he'll ill-treat her."

All the same, to be walking beside her was delight, and she frankly let him see—on her side—that it gave her pleasure to meet again.

They talked of politics. "We shall be out next week," he said, speaking of the Tory Cabinet, "and all the fat will be in the fire."

Her face showed both her eagerness and her anxiety.

"Of course, the whole question for *us* is—can our group get its just share—the share it *ought* to have?"

"In the spoils?" He laughed awkwardly. "Who can tell? Washington's gang won't let anybody else in if they can help it."

"Ah, but they won't be able to help it!" she said joyously. "Alec's very hopeful!"

"Yes? Well, whatever you want"—(there was the slightest emphasis on the "you")—"I hope you'll get. But I think perhaps in London we over-estimate the effect of—well!—what interests the clubs and politicians. You don't mind my saying so? It takes a long time for any new propaganda to reach the country. I was down, last week, at a meeting in Oxfordshire, in a little town called——"

He gave the name. Caroline started. Her beautiful eyes turned upon him.

"I know it," she said.

Melton flushed violently. Clumsy ass!—to have forgotten that the Marsworth estates lay all round that town.

He hastily gave an account of the meeting, meant to show the dogged adherence to the traditional party lines and shibboleths on the part of the average British voter. But Caroline took no heed. And when he stopped, she said, slowly, with her eyes on the further reaches of the Serpentine:

"Lord Melton!—I—I believe that you know Sir John Marsworth?"

It was his turn to start.

"Yes, certainly! We were in the same Yeomanry regiment."

"I gathered that—from something I saw—quite lately—in the *Times*. How much do you know him?"

Her questions embarrassed him.

"We have been associated in various ways during the last three years," he said hesitating. "We met on Church matters for instance—before he became a Roman. About eighteen months ago, we used to meet at an East London Mission in which we were both interested. Then his change came—and he went to that Jesuit place in Wales."

"He has left it now," she said, quickly.

He showed her a puzzled countenance—marvelling indeed at their conversation.

Then she added—

"I saw him not long ago."

Whereat he wondered more; and could find nothing at all to say. But after a moment she broke out, with quickened breath and fluttering colour.

"You said—the last time we met—you would like to—help me. Of course, I want no help—in an ordinary way. I adore my husband. I have everything I want. Except!——"

She paused a moment painfully, resuming at last, with agitation:—"I want to ask you something! If you know Sir John—if you have any influence with him—if you know anyone who has—who could persuade him—will you do something for me? Will you try and get him to let me see my child—my little girl—oftener—and for a longer time—than he permits now? Once a year—for a few hours!—that's all it has been since I parted from her. Isn't it hard? Of course—I know—I brought it on myself. But what harm could I do her? You know me—you would speak for me. Just for one fortnight in the year—or even a week—What it would mean to me!"

She spoke very low, her eyes on the ground, her voice trembling. Melton's mind was shaken by the pathos of it; and also by the sincerity, the unconscious skill, by which she had suddenly transformed the relation between them. Six weeks before, he had made her a passionate declaration, and here she walked beside him, neither goddess nor prude, but simply a mother, hungry for her child! She appealed—innocently, impulsively—to the friend in him; and the friend responded. He had gone through weeks of feverish

grief and self-reproach since he had parted from her; and suddenly, as she spoke, he found himself.

He gravely promised to help her, if he could. They walked on, talking earnestly of persons who might be of use in the business, and in the course of their discussion Melton gave her some further information. Marsworth, it seemed, had left the Jesuits because of Modernist opinions. He was still nominally a Catholic, but was in a very confused and uncertain state of mind; full too of personal grievances against members of the Order, or against important persons at Rome.

"He always seems to me very unhappy—but he never admits that he himself has had any hand in it."

A little bitter smile hovered on Caroline's lips.

"He never could!" she said, as though involuntarily.

Then as they neared the more frequented region of the Park, she paused and held out her hand.

"I shall tell Alec all I have said to you," she said—and Melton wondered again at her frankness!—"Of course—in this matter—he can do nothing. Only—last week—I saw that sentence in the *Times*—your name and John's together. And then we met—and, you see, I have taken you at your word!"

He again assured her he would do all he could. Then he wished her good luck in the turmoil of the coming week; and they parted. He went on hurriedly through the traffic of Piccadilly, head down, conscious of nothing but the eyes and voice he had left behind, and of his own strange situation. He felt that he would gladly have faced death for her. Yet—was it consciously or unconsciously?—her appeal to him had done more to kill the passion in his veins than any other kind of action on her part could possibly have achieved.

And again he was haunted by foreboding terrors about her. "In a few years, she will be the unhappiest woman in London!" he said to himself with vehemence—"and none of us will be able to do anything!"

It was quite possible, he thought, that Wing had been already unfaithful to her. It was said by her intimate friends that she was entirely in the dark—suspected nothing. But most people who cared to know, knew very well that Madge Whitton was supposed to be living on Wing's money, and was at last—after successfully protecting herself for years against any adventure of the sort—deeply and blindly in love. As to Wing's attitude, opinion was more divided. He had clearly found Mrs. Whitton useful, and had paid her handsomely for her work. But there were those who thought him a cool hand, not at all likely to be carried away a second time, and for a woman so inferior to the first. These sceptics, however, were all the more certain that Madge Whitton had this time met her fate, and singed her wings.

And with every day of hot debate in Parliament, of gossip in London drawing-rooms, of commotion in the country, the tragi-comedy in which Caroline Wing was so deeply concerned ran onward to its climax—to the moment of violence and explosion, after which nothing could be again as before.

## CHAPTER XV

THE Washingtons lived in a house secluded at the back of a Chelsea square. They were rich, but the avoidance of all show of riches was a passion with them both. They were served by parlourmaids, who had, of course, stout lads in the background to do the heavy work. But to be waited on by obsequious men at table, seemed to Elizabeth Washington an insolence on the part of the employer, and a degradation to the employed. Men were intended for nobler functions. Her Quaker spirit, and her democratic instincts, which were strong, even violent, loathed the "flunkey." But that women—and men too—should be served by women, was in the order of things; and she was a rigid though a just mistress.

The house was very simply furnished, and contained engravings of famous Evangelicals, Wilberforce, Mrs. Fry, Mrs. Opie, John Bright, Richard Cobden, Zachary Macaulay and many others. Washington's study contained books, an arm-chair, a writing-table and a Turkey carpet. Mrs. Washington carried on a vast correspondence from a corner of the back drawing-room; which was never left untidy, and made no parade whatever of the work that was done there. The same fastidious order, indeed, prevailed wherever Elizabeth Washington had sway. Her dress, though not affectedly plain, was always simple, and varied no more than from grey to black, or black and white. She affected long cloaks

which disguised her height, and gave a stately vagueness to her thin figure.

On the Monday evening of the week which was to see the critical divisions on the Budget, Mrs. Washington sat up, expecting her husband. He came in a little after eleven; evidently tired out. His wife smiled at him, prepared him some cocoa on a little stove by the fire, and waited for him to talk or not as he liked. She knew well that he was in the very thick of the *mêlée*. Her own pulses were running fast; and she longed for news. But her self-control was invincible.

When he had had his cocoa, and had sat a while with shut eyes, his long legs stretched to the fire, and the lion head thrown back, he said, without moving—

“It will be a famous victory to-morrow!”

A gleam shot through his wife’s eyes.

“I’m glad you’re so certain, Richard.”

She came to sit beside him, and laid her hand on his.

“You’ve waited for it—you’ve earned it!” she went on after a moment, with quiet exultation.

“Have I?”—the tone was weary. “Well now, Hell begins!”

His wife smiled—in sympathy.

“How people write to you!—it’s appalling!”

“Write! It’s much worse than that. I can’t escape them anywhere. The House swarms with fellows who want places; the club’s almost as bad—and I shall soon not dare show myself in the street. I went down to the City this morning, and an old general who saw me, jumped upon the taxi while we were blocked opposite the Mansion House, grew purple in the face, and shouted through the window to me at the risk of his life that there was only one man in Parliament fit to be made Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and that was his son—one of the biggest louts in the House! And



as for letters!—look here!” He opened his coat. “My pockets are stuffed with them—and from the most important people possible. Everybody has got some fish to fry, either for himself or somebody else.”

“I saw a complete list in one of the evening papers,” said his wife smiling; but observing him the while.

“Of my Government?” he laughed contemptuously. “I know—I saw it. Well, it amuses them, and doesn’t hurt me.”

“I saw Lord Wing’s name in it.”

“Oh, all the lists put Wing in somewhere.”

He shut his eyes again.

His wife was silent for a little. But after a while she put her hand on his again.

He made a slight irritable movement, but let the hand stay.

“Richard, you won’t do that—will you?” She spoke with a low voice of entreaty.

“My dear Elizabeth, I must be guided entirely by the party interests.”

“Entirely, Richard? Isn’t there something higher even than—party interests?”

“Not in this connection,” he said testily. “If I do put Wing in, he will do no harm to anyone. He’s so anxious to get on politically, that once in, he’ll give no trouble. I shall be able to manage him. But if we leave him out, he’s strong enough now to worry us abominably.”

“Oh, Richard!—surely not.”

“You must leave me to judge, my dear. Llewellyn agrees with me. Something very small will be enough to content him; so that he just scrapes into the Government. And on the whole it will suit us better than a quarrel, and having that wretched paper on our flanks.”

"All the Puritan elements, on our side, Richard, will be up in arms!" said Mrs. Washington, with energy.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I doubt it. I think they'll take it lying down. We shall be in a very shaky position for a bit. We really can't afford to have Wing's money and Wing's press against us. It's like Dizzy or Randolph again—with a difference. People are shocked—but the man gets what he wants! It is really astonishing the way he has made, in these eight months!—in spite of everything. . . . Well, now I must go to my letters. Llewellyn and two or three others are coming to see me presently. We shall probably sit till late. You'd better go to bed."

He rose, and as he stood swaying a little with fatigue, his fine shaggy head under the light, he said, reflectively—

"I confess I shall be glad—if I can—to do something for Wing, though I neither like him nor respect him. And of course I see certain risks, though I think you exaggerate them. It was obvious we couldn't be bribed into running him for a constituency. But this is different. At least I think it is. And certainly there never was a woman who put up a pluckier fight for the man she loved than Lady Wing! *You* ought to appreciate that, Lizzy!"

His fine face broke into a smile. Bending over, he kissed his wife's forehead, hurrying from the room immediately afterwards, as though to escape any further conversation on the matter.

No more childish lack of insight was ever shown by a great man, than in these farewell remarks!

His wife remained standing where he had left her, her face set in a kind of pale intensity. Then she went

slowly into the back drawing-room, lit the electric light over the writing-table, and sat down before it—for some time motionless, her hands lying on her knee. Her thoughts were flying far ahead. Lord Wing in the Ministry; Eltham House, not hostile as now, but friendly and indispensable; the common meeting-ground of the party; all the members of the Government, with Richard at their head, becoming the familiars of the splendid house, the friends of its beautiful and triumphant mistress: she foresaw it all. Richard would go there constantly—she never. She had refused to have any dealings with Lady Wing, even to be introduced to her. And pride and self-respect, to say nothing of moral considerations, must entirely prevent a change of attitude on her part. Meanwhile at the back of her troubled yet determined mind lay the gnawing thought—Can I trust my influence with Richard, as against *hers*? Could any man resist so much beauty and such surroundings—if he were always seeing her—on her own terms—in a world from which his wife was banished?

No!—she was not sure enough!—she was *not*! Had she ever been quite sure? Were not the critical years of middle age now in front of them, when Richard's natural susceptibility, his eager pleasure in the companionship of women, a susceptibility absorbed, so far, or directed, by his wife, might easily detach him from her? And who so likely to rouse that susceptibility—to lead him astray—as Caroline Wing? A woman of no scruples, as her history showed, and with every possible motive for capturing the man on whom her husband's advancement would depend.

Not that Washington's wife feared any vulgar *dénouement*, any ordinary scandal. Richard would never betray any trust, let alone the trust of marriage;

and Lady Wing, it was said, was still infatuated and enslaved by the man for whom she had broken both divine and human law. But what she *did* fear was a loss of empire; a loss of influence over her husband's mind and sympathies. She was a strong and able woman. It galled her unspeakably to think of entering into any sort of competition with Lady Wing, even were she certain of winning it. And she was not certain.

She thought long. And presently she began to write letters. All the chief Evangelical and Nonconformist leaders in the country were well known to her. She was in close touch with them all. Some of them were her intimate friends, to whose preaching and example she owed a great personal debt. To two or three of these friends—especially to the eminent Presbyterian Minister of whose church she was a member—she wrote long and eloquently. The moral standards of the party—of the country—were at stake. She asked them to strengthen her husband's hands against the pressure now being brought upon him to include a notorious offender, somehow and somewhere, within the four corners of his administration, and she pleaded, on public grounds, that whatever steps they might think it necessary to take, her letter—her one and only warning—should be treated as matter of the strictest confidence by those whom she addressed; she had felt it her duty to give the signal. It was for them to fight.

It was a great night in the House of Commons. Every seat was full, the spaces behind the Speaker's chair and beyond the bar crowded with members for whom there was no room on the benches. The second reading debate on the famous Tory Budget had occupied the best part of three weeks, and the division was to be taken at the close of the evening.

In the private ladies' gallery of the Speaker sat the Duchess and Caroline Wing. There also were the great Tory ladies, knowing they were beaten, and determined to show their Liberal supplanters that although they were sorry of course for "the poor country"—it did not matter to them personally one rap. In a dark corner, very much out of sight, and with their faces close to the *grille*, sat Mrs. Washington, and an old-maid sister, amiable and grey-haired, of Robert Llewellyn. In the gallery opposite, over the clock, Caroline could distinguish her husband among a group of peers—his arms resting on the rail in front of him, and his face upon them—absorbed in what was happening below.

There was considerable excitement, and even tumult on the floor of the House. Speakers were constantly interrupted, and the bores at least were subjected to the rhythmic chant of "'Vide!" "'Vide!"—from those who felt that everything had been said that could be said, and were impatient for the vote. In the Ladies' Gallery, behind the *grille*, and immediately above the Speaker's chair, the Duchess and Caroline had been much harassed by the sarcastic comments too audibly whispered of a stout lady belonging to the outgoing party, standing behind them; and the Duchess had required much keeping in order. At one time she indignantly proposed sending a note down to the Speaker asking him to maintain the rule of silence in his own gallery. Then her anger succumbed to her sense of humour. "Poor wretch! He's too busy, I'm afraid, with the devils below, to give any attention to the angels above!" she said, twinkling, to Caroline; and was thenceforward so pleased with her own *mot* as to "suffer fools gladly." Caroline, however, was too much on edge to laugh; too conscious through every nerve of the

neighbourhood of Mrs. Washington, and of Alec's face opposite. By intuition and by report Carrie knew a good deal of the incoming Premier's wife; she knew in particular that she and Elizabeth Washington had never shaken hands, and with that lady's free will never would; and she was well aware of the power exercised by the tall fine-faced woman over Richard Washington and the party. Despairingly Caroline felt her the obstacle in the path; and vague, foolish imaginings surged up in her mind of seeking an interview—arguing—entreating.

Carrie herself was tired out; and so was Wing. During the preceding days and weeks he had become increasingly excitable and short-tempered; now at the top of certainty and hope, now in the depths; now extolling the men who served him, including Donovan, as the cleverest and noblest fellows going; the next denouncing them as a set of fools and asses, and only preserved from irremediable quarrels by Caroline's tact and diplomacy. She herself had been going through a time of hard disillusionment, not to be confessed even to herself. Her husband's arrogance and self-seeking, the coarse or gritty elements in the clay of which he was built, had become plain sometimes even to her fond eyes. She loved him as much as ever; she lived in him and for him; but her love was passing steadily, though unconsciously, from the first stage of passion—which clings and adores and wonders—into the second, which protects and cherishes. To make him happy, to give him what he desired, and so to make up for the wrong she had done him—(she had begun to put it so to herself!)—these were the objects of her soul.

. . . . She was suddenly recalled to the scene below. The Speaker, rising, put the question.

"Aye!"—the shout rang up to the galleries—

followed instantly by the answering "No"—a roar from the Opposition side.

"The Ayes have it," said the Speaker.

"No!" thundered out again.

"Ayes to the left—Noes to the right."

Immediately the floor below became a moving hive of men leaving the House for the division.

Ten minutes more, and the Opposition had done its deed. Familiar scene!—but never without its thrill for those who have English history in their veins, who remember that these men of to-day are the heirs of Pitt, Fox, and Burke. The tellers with the numbers had walked up the floor of the House bowing to the Speaker, and as soon as it was seen that the Opposition tellers were on the right or winning side, pandemonium broke loose. The House became a forest of waving order-papers, a tumult of cheering men. Ministers, pale and smiling, rose from the front bench, gathered up their papers and prepared to leave the stage of their long ascendancy. Behind them their followers applauded; in front of them their opponents jeered and shouted. Then, as though at a signal, the whole tumult dropped. Ministerialists and Opposition rushed off into the lobbies where the journalists were waiting for them.

Caroline and the Duchess rose too. They were to meet Wing in the Central Lobby. Caroline was trembling with excitement. She was in evening dress, as she had returned to the House after dining at home. The Ladies' Gallery was hot, and her sable cloak had dropped from her shoulders, showing the white throat and breast, the gleam of jewels, and the folds of a velvet gown. A twisting of thinnest gold lay on her dark hair, with one sparkling stone—an emerald—set just above the brow, and all the brilliant flush and softness of her face. As she stepped into the light of the corridor

outside the Ladies' Gallery, even the Duchess, who was not observant of such things, was startled by her beauty. But the moment afterwards the Duchess noticed something else!—that a woman in a plain black dress was coldly and silently making room for Caroline to pass her. The Duchess recognised Mrs. Washington; she saw Caroline's look—hesitating—impulsive—the lips opening as though to speak, and the sudden marked movement by which Mrs. Washington retreated into a doorway behind her till the other had passed by.

"Just like her!" thought the Duchess indignantly. "A dragoon of a woman! I hate her! And I expect she has Carrie in the hollow of her hand."

Now they were in the Central Lobby. Caroline a little pale, but queenly, moving through a whirl of friends and foes; eagerly greeted by some, stared at by others, observed by all.

Alec she perceived in the distance, lounging, his hands in his pockets, talking to the sallow-faced man with the long hatchet chin, hair straggling over his forehead, and shabby clothes—Edward Donovan—who had been instructing the public all these weeks through the megaphone of Wing's principal newspaper. He wore a quiet, mocking look; saying little, and that little ambiguous; but he made his way obsequiously to Lady Wing to shake hands on the exit of the Government.

"Very good fun all that shouting!" he said pointing with a smile to the entrance of the House of Commons—"but the real work now begins. I wouldn't be in Washington's shoes, for the next few days."

"A beastly business!—always is," said Wing who had joined them. "Well, Washington has nothing to fear from me. I shall toady nobody! What we ask, we ask publicly."



There was a slight satiric compression in the strong mouth of the editor. But he assented with the remark—

“Certainly. All the world knows what we want: ring out the old fogies, and ring in the new men!”

Sir Oliver Lewson caught the words as he made his way through the crowd to speak to Caroline. He nodded to Donovan—

“Which are *we*, eh?” Then, in Caroline’s ear—  
“I just want to say that, as far as I can hear, prospects are good!”

She flushed brightly, thanking him with her eyes, and they gossiped a little, while Alec stood moodily by her, glancing restlessly from face to face among the throng of members and journalists. Then Llewellyn passed with his sister, and Caroline held out a welcoming hand.

“How long will it take?” she asked him smiling.

“The new Ministry? Oh, a week for the principal offices—a fortnight till everybody’s appointed. Washington of course will see the King to-morrow.”

A fresh outburst of cheering startled them both. Washington had just emerged from one of the inner doors accompanied by his wife. His friends pressed round him in a tumult of enthusiasm and triumph. He was very pale, but his eyes glowed, and he had never been more completely master of himself. He found the right word to say to each man who approached him, and all the time he made his way towards Caroline, who awaited him with a throbbing pulse. In another minute her hand was in his.

“Now you have your chance!” she said, ardently,  
“It’s too, too splendid!”

But, as she spoke, she moved forward involuntarily, expecting that at last he would introduce her to his wife.

But Mrs. Washington had already disappeared. .

Carrie looked round her, bewildered. Meanwhile, the Liberal leader warmly pressed the hand he held.

"It's worth something when you are pleased!" he said, so that only she could hear. Then, with a laugh, "Pray for me these next days. Good night!" And with a grip and a smile for Wing, of the same sort that he gave to scores of others, the great man passed on.

"Caroline!—let's go home! I've sent for the motor," said Alec, peremptorily, beside her.

"I thought you'd be going to the club, Alec!—or the office."

"Let's go home!" he repeated impatiently.

Husband and wife sped home together through streets already placarded with the news of the fall of the Ministry. Alec gathered up the pile of letters for him in the hall, and followed Carrie into her sitting-room.

When the door was shut, she turned to him with outstretched hands—eyeing him—half joyous, half shrinking.

"I *think* it's going well, Alec!—oh, I think it is!"

He took the hands, indifferently, and let them drop—

"I'm glad you do. But I'm afraid what you—or I—think, matters uncommonly little."

"But you've worked so hard!—and there are so many with you—supporting you."

"H'm—more cry I think than wool! At least I think so to-day. I don't know what to think."

And with an angry shake of his fair curls he thrust his hands again into his pockets, and began to pace the floor, in a frowning restlessness.

She tried to soothe him, to discuss the great events

of the evening. But he scarcely listened to her; and presently she became vaguely alarmed. This despondency was unusual, unlike him. Was he overdone with the six months' campaign, or were things known to him that were still unknown to her? And always this guilty sense that it was she who was the difficulty!—she who was undoing him!

She grew pale, but she went up to him, and slipped her arm in his.

"Darling!—if it goes wrong—if you can't get what you want, it'll come—in time."

He turned upon her.

"If I don't get what I want now—it will never come, and I shall give it up!"

"Alec!—and you're so young!—we've got all the years before us!"

"Worse luck!—I sometimes think. What are we going to do with them? And I can tell you, Carrie, I'm not going to carry on the life I've been leading this last six months—for ever. Don't think it! I'm sick to death of it! It's been a dog's life!"

"Alec!—and I thought you'd been enjoying it! You've been so successful. Think of the meetings—the speeches—all the friends you've made! Oh, Alec, darling!—don't be discouraged! If not now—another time!" She nestled her beautiful head against his shoulder—pleading.

"No!" he said, with an obstinate vehemence that amazed her—"if not now—*never*! The hypocrites, and Pharisees who will have beaten me, will beat me always. *They* don't change!—curse them!"

"But they won't beat you, Alec! Mr. Donovan is persuaded you'll get your opening. Think how friendly Mr. Washington was—just now!"

"To *you*—they're all nice to you!" he said, almost

fiercely. "What does it mean? Nothing! And I won't go on with it, Carrie. If I fail now, I cut the business. I'm not meant for a demagogue. I can do the trick as well as most people, if it *succeeds*. If I don't succeed—good-bye! I'm not going to spend my life in flattering and wheedling ugly, stupid people who don't understand a word you say to them, packed into stuffy, smelly rooms—in stuffy, smelly towns—in shaking their dirty hands, and listening to their silly talk. It's worth while—as a prelude to something else in itself—it's *beastly!*"

"Alec!" She was aghast at the outburst. After a minute she asked him in a low voice, her eyes on the floor, as they paced.

"What would you do, then?"

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I don't know—I suppose there's always travel."

"Of course there is!" she said, brightening. "We could go away together again—and throw off everything!" Her eyes looked tenderly into his. "Couldn't we, Alec?"

"Well, I don't know," he said, slowly. "Sometimes when a man's in the mood that I shall be if Washington fails me, he's best alone."

"*Alone?*" She came to a sudden startled pause, her arms dropping to her sides, her pale looks turned upon him.

"There, there, I didn't mean it," he said hastily. "Of course we shall have time to think it out—plenty of time. Why don't you go to bed, Carrie? You look like a ghost."

But she would not go till—driving back by main force the fears that surged upon her—she had drawn him out of his pit of depression. She used all her powers; she made play with all her beauty; and in the

end she succeeded. The black moment passed. She made him read his letters which were full—as it happened—of encouragement; she reported to him all the friendly and hopeful things that had been said to her, she reminded him of the powerful friends he had lately made. Before half an hour was over he was his sanguine, confident, boasting self again.

But that night Caroline slept little. Some of the things Alec had said went echoing dismally through her mind. Nonsense!—nonsense! She pushed them from her. Alec forsake her?—leave her alone? He never would! His talk had been the mere passing extravagance of a tired man.

Cabinet-making went merrily on. There was first the inner Cabinet—the half-dozen men about whom nobody doubted; they were in constant communication with the new Prime Minister, grinding other people's axes, since their own were safe. Then came the middle line, the men who wanted more than they were worth, and vowed they would take nothing less; among them, perhaps, Washington found his hardest task. And finally there was the large border throng, made up of the new men of ability, and the old mediocrities, struggling for the minor offices. And it was here especially that women came in—the mothers and the wives, whose letters and intrigues and cajoleries made the new Premier's life a burden to him.

Every day the newspapers contained long lists of the embryo Government, and every day the list of certainties—men who had found their billet—grew longer, and the list of doubtfuls, names with a query after them, grew shorter. In this latter section, day after day, appeared the name of Lord Wing; as repre-

senting now this, now that office, for the Government in the House of Lords.

Meanwhile Eltham House was filled every night with a gossiping, political crowd, all cheerful and congratulatory. The *New Gazette* had hauled down its flag of attack, and was ingeminating peace and compromise. Alec, under one excuse or another, sat at home in case he should be sent for; and Carrie could hardly breathe for excitement. Alec's success seemed so near; a new and honourable future, blotting out the past and giving an able man his chance, appeared so certain; she already felt herself forgiven and restored; readmitted above all to that world of good women which had cast her out. Not all at once, of course—but by degrees. And then surely John would be less cruel about Carina! She thought with hunger of the child, and of Lord Melton's promise.

Then, without any warning, one or two less favourable signs began to appear. Some Liberal papers, of Dissenting tendencies, began to publish articles on the need for exacting a high standard of personal character in the public men of the nation; one or two Tory papers, referring to the Liberal attacks which had been made on the private affairs of a Tory politician earlier in the year, allowed themselves mysterious sarcasms to the effect that it was easier to be virtuous for other people than for oneself; and a High Church, Socialist weekly called upon Washington in impassioned language not to admit any man with a smirched record to his administration. To appoint such a person to any office whatever would be to challenge the conscience of the country. After which, other rumours began to creep about—in the inner circles. And presently to some few persons the affair began to present itself as a duel—a strange and silent

duel—between two women, who never met, who were not acquainted with each other, but on whose rival power the political career of Alec Wing in truth depended.

At last one evening, after a day marked by attacks more numerous and outspoken than ever before on the proposed admission to the Government of a "co-respondent in a recent notorious divorce case," Robert Llewellyn ran into Sir Oliver Lewson at the corner of St. James's Street.

"Hullo, Lewson!—I was just coming to look for you. Can you give me ten minutes' conversation? Come into the Park."

The two men turned back into the Mall. Llewellyn, who was now Secretary for India, looked extremely grave and worried. Lewson guessed—in a flash—what was coming.

"I want you to go and tell Lady Wing"—said Llewellyn abruptly—"now, if you can—at once!—before she sees the final list in the papers—that we're all awfully sorry!—but we find it can't be done. Washington's tried his best, but the purity party—High and Low Church—have got wind of the thing, and the pressure on him is simply extraordinary. Letters arrive by every post from the leaders of the Dissenting bodies—deans—bishops—clergy—Heaven knows who!—the whole black crew. And in addition"—he lowered his voice—"as of course you know, Washington has a preacher of his own—on the hearth!"

Lewson shrugged his shoulders.

"Naturally, we suspected danger—from that quarter."

"In my belief the whole difficulty springs from there—has been organised there," said Llewellyn, with something like vehemence. "But one can't say so to

Washington. He's really distressed. He meant to have done it—for *her* sake, chiefly. I can venture to say that to you! But we can't break up the party. You know what English people are—how a thing of this kind, a trifle with no bearing at all on the main issues—becomes a main issue before you know where you are—and the whole pitch is queered. But some of us wish a certain lady and her crew at the bottom of the sea!"

"So—it's all settled?" said Lewson after a pause.

"I'm afraid so. It's spoilt the whole of this exciting, and otherwise most satisfactory week—for me. A constituency was out of the question. But this was different. I thought we could just have done it, and I believe it would have been the making of the man. However—to be honest—it wasn't him I cared about."

"Poor lady!" said Lewson softly—"poor brave lady!"

Llewellyn nodded—with a countenance of distress.

"She'll have a time of it with Wing, before she's done. He's extremely able—that we've all found out—but absolutely violent and unbalanced. However, I oughtn't to say these things to you."

Lewson smiled queerly. He too was beginning to find his agent's task no easy one.

"Say what you like."

"No use! I suppose money goes to some men's heads—like champagne. It makes them insolent fools. Wing might get all he wants by time and diplomacy. And he won't try either. But please go and warn her—at once! That's why I stopped you."

The voice, the small round eyes were full of concern. Never was there a more disturbed philosopher.

"I saw Wing at the club just now."

Llewellyn assented.



"He was there. Possibly Washington's letter will find him there. I left the Prime writing it—twenty minutes ago—we'd had a long discussion—and the messenger would have instructions to track Wing down and deliver it."

Lewson opened his eyes.

"It's got as far as that?"

"Yes—I believe so," said Llewellyn reluctantly. "Washington had made up his mind; and I had his leave to give Lady Wing warning."

The two men parted; and Lewson made his way quickly along the Mall towards Eltham House, through a March evening breathing spring.

An hour later, in a corner of the great Liberal club, which had been seething with life and excitement all these critical days, Alec Wing received and read a letter—short, kind, regretful, but decided—from the Prime Minister.

Having read it, its recipient thrust it into his pocket, and pushing his way blindly through the groups in the club smoking-room, he went out into the mild spring air. Walking through back streets he made his way across Piccadilly and into Mayfair. Then he stopped at a small house in St. John Street, and knocked at the door. A maid opened it, who smiled discreetly at the sight of Lord Wing, as though at something familiar.

"Is Mrs. Whitton at home?"

"Oh yes, my lord. Will you please walk upstairs?"

## CHAPTER XVI

MRS. WHITTON was not in the drawing-room, and Alec Wing stood waiting for her, hat in hand.

His eyes wandered round the room. How familiar it had grown! All the same he hated it. It was associated with all that he now wished to forget.

Carrie had known nothing of his visits there, had believed, innocent as she was, that he and Madge Whitton no longer saw each other. Well? He had not betrayed his wife—he had done nothing irreparable—so he angrily assured himself. Madge Whitton had suited him; had been of use to him. Carrie was so absurdly romantic and fastidious; always objecting to this or that. Madge was a woman of the world; and knew no omelets could be made without eggs. She understood the shadier sides of people; no insipid belief in human nature in her!

All the same, she *had* suited him, and suited the campaign—the horrid campaign—he had been waging. He and she, and that chap Donovan—rather a comfort by the way to be rid of him, and his daily lectures and liberties!—had really planned the attack, week by week, in that room, discussing especially a number of private matters relating to individuals; how to bribe one man; how to threaten another; dirty work, most of it! Wing's pride looked back upon it with abhorrence. But Madge had shown herself extraordinarily clever over it. Nothing tangible—nothing to be traced

and apparently, great success. *Apparently!*—for after all what had come of it? His cup was filled to overflowing with bitterness and wounded vanity.

And Madge? Well, he had paid handsomely. All her debts were settled; her investments changed; her income largely increased. He had heaped gifts upon her; and was uneasily conscious that a certain number of people knew it.

But as to anything else? Well, that was her fault—if “anything else” had happened. He thought, with discomfort, of his leave-taking from her on the occasion of his last visit to her—three days before. Suddenly—near that door—she with her back to it had said—“Kiss me—Alec!”—hungrily, peremptorily; and he taken aback—confused—flattered—had stooped and kissed her. Then, with a sudden sob and fluttering breath, she had let him go; and he had walked away feeling himself a great fool, and angry with her. He had never made love to her; he vowed he hadn’t; not more, at any rate, than any man must, under the circumstances. She couldn’t have misunderstood him; she was too old a hand.

And in the evening he had written to her apologising for his behaviour—“which mustn’t spoil our friendship!” It seemed to him the best thing he could do. There had been no reply.

And now this was the last time they would meet—for a long, long time. But this visit he owed her. She had been a staunch ally!

A sound at the door. She came in slowly—in a pale purple dress, her fair hair catching the light.

“How do you do! Alack!—I know. Penwenack has written to me. I’m awfully sorry.”

She spoke in a slow tired voice; and he saw that she was very pale.

"Well nobody could have fought for me better than you," he said, as he touched a languid hand.

"Yes, I did my best." She sank into a chair; and he found one not far off. But his eyes avoided hers. He did not want to see what was in them; he wanted to get away. Yet they sat and talked a while, about the persons and forces that had after all won the victory:—a spiritless talk.

"And what are you going to do now?" she asked, after a pause.

"I shall take myself off somewhere—the farther the better."

"Won't that seem like—running away?"

"I don't care a devil's halfpenny—if it does!" he said bitterly. "I'm sick of London for a bit. I shan't stay here to be jeered at."

"Well, you've plenty of places to go to!" She smiled, faintly.

"Oh, I shall get out of England! I've just telegraphed to the yacht. I sent orders to get her ready some weeks ago—in case. I shall do some climbing in the Andes—shake the cobwebs out of one's brain."

He rose as he spoke, and she saw him, sharply outlined against the western light which was streaming in through a bow window. A splendid figure of a man, with the piled curls and aquiline features of an Apollo; doubly splendid in this golden twilight, which magnified the whole, while it disguised the details; the arrogance in the eyes, the sensuous obstinacy of the mouth.

But Madge Whitton saw only the Apollo—the man whose physical attraction had slowly and fatally captured her through the weeks and months of the winter and spring. She too rose, and for one moment the impulse was on her to throw herself into his arms,

and so test at last what her woman's power might be. And it was as though he divined it—and feared it. For he stepped backward. She read the movement; she remembered his letter, his cold, shuffling letter; and with a life-and-death effort she recovered her self-control. After all, what had she ever expected from him? Had he ever really been in love with anybody, except himself? As for his campaign, she had never really believed in it for an hour.

"So it's good-bye—for a long time?" She held out her hand.

"Possibly. I want to thank you awfully for what you've done. I shall never forget it. When I'm far away I shall write and tell you what I feel. And mind you let me know—if you want anything."

"You've given me too much already," she said, with a forced laugh, her hand still in his. "When you're far away you'll think of me as a grasping woman who got money out of you!"

"I shan't—I never shall!" he said, in rather irritable embarrassment, the colour rushing into his face. "You mustn't say such things! I shall always think of you as the kindest of friends."

"And the most useless!" she said, with a great sigh—which seemed to him theatrical. Their hands dropped apart. "Good-bye. *Bon voyage!*—and all the adventures that are good for you! I suppose Lady Wing goes with you."

"I am going alone."

She was conscious of a fierce satisfaction. If she had been no use, no more had his wife, for all her famous *salon*. Then, half turned away, her head over her shoulder, with a graceful half-mocking gesture that became her, she waved her hand to him as he left the room.

She waited till the hall-door closed. Then for long, she sat motionless on the edge of a sofa, staring into the sunset, seeing nothing, unless it were the mental image of the man who had lately stood there. Her whole nature was in a grip of suffering, ugly unexpected suffering; as though she had been caught unawares and crushed. Looking back over the year that had passed, she knew that almost from the first moment of their acquaintance she had meant to possess herself of Alec Wing, to appeal to him, not only through her wits, but through his senses. His wealth had excited in her a greed for money and luxury; and his political obligation to her had pleased her vanity, and tickled ambition. But there had been a good deal more than that in it—a good deal more. She had worked precious hard for him; though lately without hope of success.

And the net result of it all was this dumb tumult of mind and heart; wounded pride and wounded feeling struggling in darkness. She had fallen in love with this man, all the more desperately because nothing but that one kiss had ever passed between them. And from beginning to end she had meant no more to him than an agent and go-between!—that was now clear. He had paid her handsomely—and escaped her! The thought of his instinctive retreat returned upon her again and again, and the humiliation of it burnt within her.

Yet after a while the cynic in her recovered some command. Nothing fatal had happened. She had not given herself away—to anybody but him. Her debts were paid, her income doubled. In time this miserable ache would get better, in time—"I shall forget all about him! And meanwhile his beautiful wife has no more hold over him than I." He was not going to take that fair lady with him in his flight from London. That made the only pleasing point in a dark horizon.

Whereupon she went to the mirror over the mantelpiece, put her hair straight, and arranged various laces and folds of her bodice, carefully examining her white face and dark-rimmed eyes the while; after which, when her elderly cousin (and paying guest) descended ready for dinner, in complete ignorance of course of all that had happened, Madge suddenly remembered a theatre engagement for nine o'clock, and instead of telephoning and retiring to bed with a headache, forced herself to go and put on her best gown, and to order the car which Wing had given her.

Meanwhile, in the yellow drawing-room at Eltham House, Durrant and Joyce Allen sat uneasily talking. Durrant had just come back from a fortnight's training in camp, and had the lean wholesome look of a man who had been rising at five o'clock, riding for hours in the open air, and sleeping the soldier's sleep. It seemed to him on the contrary that Miss Allen had grown extremely thin, and looked as though London were taking the life out of her. But the same thought was in both their minds. What was Sir Oliver talking about in her sitting-room with Lady Wing?

Not that Durrant was much in doubt as to the situation. He had come across various men in the course of the afternoon who had told him confidently that Lord Wing's name would not appear in the completed list of Washington's Administration, which would be in all the newspapers on the morrow. He had communicated his information to Joyce, and she had said simply—"I'm *very* sorry!" But Durrant didn't believe that she was sorry for Wing—or sorry for the country. He was tolerably sure that Joyce's little white soul was all for rigour in such things. But she was sorry—as he was—desperately sorry!—for a

woman, whose daily happiness depended, apparently, on Wing's getting everything he wanted. Joyce gave him a low-voiced account of the preceding weeks, the perpetual effort and strain of them—Caroline's feverish absorption in the campaign—her triumphs in one direction—her mortifications or rebuffs in another.

"Of course it's made people more bitter against her," said the girl sadly.

"Of course," Durrant assented. And the look of sympathy in his kind bronzed face upset Joyce's discretion.

"She thinks of him—nothing but him—morning, noon, and night," she cried—her eyes blinking with sudden tears. "While he——"

"Never thinks of her at all! Don't I know it!" said Durrant gloomily. "The question is now—what can she do with him?"

As he spoke, the door leading from the drawing-room into Caroline's special sanctum opened, and Caroline came in, with Sir Oliver.

She was talking fast. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks pink. "Good-bye, dear Sir Oliver—good-bye! A thousand thanks. I'll think of all you say."

She gave him her hand; he hesitated a moment; then bent over it, and kissed it. After which he walked out of the room apparently unconscious of the two other persons there.

But Caroline came towards them, pressing her hands to her eyes.

"Sir Oliver tells me it's no good," she said, in a voice that quivered slightly, her eyes still hidden; "I'm afraid Alec will be dreadfully disappointed."

"Alec must buck up!" said Durrant with a cousinly bluntness, as he sprang up to get a chair for her. "What does it matter! He has everything in the world



a man can want. What wouldn't a lot of fellows give to be in his shoes for a year! And heaps to do—if he would only do it!"

Carrie did not reply. She sat with her hand in Joyce's, looking restlessly about her.

"I wonder where he will have heard it?" she said, as though to herself. "He ought to be in soon."

The next minute she sprang from her seat and went to the fire as though shivering.

"Why don't they turn on the heat properly?" she said fretfully. "But it's the house. You can't warm such a place as this. It's too big—too big for anyone. If I were Alec I'd turn it into a hospital."

And she crouched over the fire spreading her delicate hands to the blaze. Durrant came to stand beside her, his heart full of compassion.

"You've found a use for it!" he said, kindly.

"What—my salon?" She laughed. "It gives me no pleasure, Jim. I should be much happier in a small house with just a few friends."

"You want a rest," said Durrant decidedly. "Why don't you take Alec abroad?—clear out of London for a bit. There's that yacht eating its head off at Southampton."

Caroline turned her head suddenly—as though she heard a footstep. Nor did her instinct mislead her. The door opened, and Alec Wing came in.

He stopped abruptly on the threshold, looking with annoyance at his cousin and Joyce Allen. Joyce gathered up her work and letters, and fled hastily. Durrant stood his ground, as Wing came forward.

"Awfully sorry, Alec, that you haven't pulled it off. Better luck next time!"

"Well, that's not my point of view," said Wing

shortly. "But I won't argue it.—So you've heard?" he turned to his wife with a sombre countenance.

"Sir Oliver came in, Alec," she said, as though she excused herself. "Mr. Llewellyn sent him."

"Damned officious!" was the sharp reply. "Well, Carrie, I have a lot to say to you."

Durrant took the hint, and departed, throwing a last look at Carrie, as she lay back in her chair, her eyes fixed on Alec—eyes full of shrinking, of love, of entreaty.

The young soldier went downstairs possessed by a strong desire to kick something or somebody. From the look of him Alec was bent on being disagreeable to his wife by way of paying his scores against other people. What a fool!—what an incredible fool!—charging the world, head down, like any mad bull—because he could not at once get his own way. "We can't have licked him half enough at Eton! And yet I remember taking a hand." For when Durrant had been in the Sixth, Alec had been a Lower Boy, in the same house, and had been duly "worked off" by his elders on two or three occasions for outrageous behaviour. Clearly a great deal more had been wanted.

"Well, Carrie, so that's done with!" said Wing, standing on the hearth-rug beside his wife, his hands in his pockets.

As he spoke, a footman noiselessly entered the room, in order to draw the curtains and make up the fire. Wing turned on him with fury.

"Can't I ever be left alone! Go, sir, and don't come back till you're rung for."

The footman made a hasty exit. Carrie flushed hotly, and then restrained herself.

"They say"—her voice was low and bitter—"that Mrs. Washington has done it. She's stirred up people in London—in Manchester—Birmingham—all over. Mr. Washington's been flooded with letters. He would have done it—he wanted to do it—but she—wouldn't let him. It is strange she should hate us—hate me—so!"

And again, Carrie covered her eyes with her hands.

"Why of course I know all that!" said Wing impatiently. "And it's not the least strange. We always knew that woman would do her worst. But we thought that we had got the better of her clique—cut their claws—that Washington would think it on the whole better policy to square us than to square them. Well, we've failed—she's won—all along the line. And for me it's decisive. If I'm a 'co-respondent in a notorious divorce case' now, and the fact is going to bar me from political life, it'll be no different a year—two years—three years hence. There'll always be some old cats on the watch—male and female. And I could never bring myself to lick their paws again, as I've done this year. It's sickening to think of. No—it's done with—*it's done with!*"

He spoke with terrible violence, and as he paced up and down, the force of passion in him silenced and almost paralysed his wife. It was with difficulty she managed to say—imploringly—

"But Alec—there's so much else!"

He turned upon her—

"What is there—that I care about? What is there—for a man in my position—with a political family behind him—and our English traditions—what game is there worth playing—but politics? Don't talk nonsense, Carrie! If I were an American, I suppose I might be a Mugwump and not mind. But an English-

man of my class—what is there, but politics? They won't have me in the Army—they won't have me in the House of Commons—and if I were to claim my rights at Court—if I had claimed them the other day in the Lords' procession—Court flunkeys would insult me. Here I am, *married*—by the law of the land—with ten times as clean a record, if you come to that, as half the men—aye, and the women too!—who are hounding us out of public life. I have the wish to serve my country, and the power to serve my country; and a parcel of damned Pharisees make it impossible. And perhaps you don't realise the humiliation of it! I admit I have played high, and I have *lost*—you and I have lost—in the sight of the whole country. It doesn't matter to you——”

“Alec!” It was a cry of one wounded to the heart. But in his bitter agitation it did not stop him.

“How can it matter to you—in the same way! What does a little social boycotting matter, to you—or to me? We can snap our fingers at that. It's the spoiling a man's career—the refusal of public openings and opportunities to a man who could use them well, to please a lot of canting hypocrites, that's the damnable, the unpardonable thing!” He struck his hand on the table beside her. “I can't stand it, Carrie. I'm going out of this. I can't meet these men in the street—or the club. I'm not going to dine—or smoke—or shoot with them. I've had a sickening of London—and the country too. I wash my hands of England, and the whole business!”

“Alec!—think of the estates—all we might do there. Come down with me to the country—let's live our own life—depend on ourselves!”

She held out her hands to him, entreating. But he shook his head.

"How am I ever to get away from what's happened—away from politics? They'll want my money—my influence all the same—though I am a pariah. Thank you! No!—I'm going out of sight and sound of it all—to freedom and the backwoods!"

And throwing himself into a chair, he lit a cigarette with a hand that shook. She sprang up, and ran across to him, kneeling beside him.

"Alec—what do you mean?"

Her terror was in her face.

"Don't make a scene, Carrie! It will be much better for you to let me go. I've been a beast to you lately—I know that. I should only make you miserable if I stayed. I shall come back of course—when I've had time to think things over."

"Where are you going, Alec?"

"I've told the yacht to be at Southampton, the day after to-morrow. There's an old pal of mine in the Guards—Charlie Wells—who knows South America, has done some climbing in the Andes, and that kind of thing. He says he'll come with me. The point is—to drop Europe out of sight for a bit!"

"And your wife, Alec?" She rose and stood beside him, her hands behind her.

"We've got to think out our lives again," he said obstinately. "I admit you've done all you could to help me." But the tone was strangely grudging. Every word hurt.

"You mean—you really are—going away alone—that I mayn't come with you?"

"I shall do better alone. If you're wise, Carrie, you won't make a fuss."

"And how long will you be away?"

"Oh I don't know—six months certainly—perhaps a year!"

She grew deadly white.

"And what am I to do?"

"You will have everything you can possibly want. Lewson will be at your orders. You can live where you please—here or in the country. There'll be plenty of money."

She moved on slowly over the polished floor, her hands still behind her, her eyes on the ground. There was silence till turning she came back to him.

"Alec—were you ever really in love with me?"

The words came quietly—but brokenly.

A reply—dictated by the brutality of wounded pride, leapt out.

"Well, I think I risked enough for you, Carrie!"

"Too much—you think now?"

"Nonsense!"

"No, it's not nonsense!" she said, drawing her breath with difficulty.—"You are sorry now you ever met me—sorry you ever persuaded me. For you did persuade me, Alec. It was not I who begged and prayed in those days. You think—in your heart of hearts—that I've ruined your life—that I tempted you—and ruined you! I who gave up my children—my good name—relations—friends—everything!—for you—my Dicky!—Carina!"—Her voice choked. She pressed her hands to her breast, trying to keep down the actual physical storm. "What do you suppose your money—or your great houses—really matter to me? What'll this house be to me—when you're gone—but a ghastly sham and weariness! Oh, I've been so tired—so *tired*—for months!"—she wrung her hands, piteously unconsciously.—"But I could do anything—face anything—for you, so long as you loved me. And now instead of our facing this together—helping each other—clinging together all the closer—because of those

who condemn and despise us—you are going to leave me alone—to bear everything—without you. But I'm not fit to bear it alone, Alec—I haven't the strength. You offered me happiness—and I took it—because I was weak—and couldn't stand alone. It's unkind, what you propose—it's *cruel*. Why mayn't I come with you? Should I ever reproach you or jeer at you?"

"No—but you would remind me," he said stubbornly. "We should talk the beastly thing over, and we should always have it in our minds. I want to get quit of it!"

"And of me!" she said, under her breath. There was a forlorn passion in the words which almost moved him. But he braced himself against it.

"Of everybody—for a time. Let me go, Carrie, or I'm afraid you'll repent it. And the sooner I go the sooner I shall come back."

She pleaded and argued a while longer; but wholly in vain. Then there came a moment, when she suddenly ceased to wrestle with him; when a silent despair seized upon her; and the inglorious fight was won.

Nor did anyone else avail anything. Lewson and Durrant tried their best; but Lewson's hands were tied by his position as agent, and Durrant's by the peremptory necessity for doing nothing which could jeopardise Joyce Allen's position in Wing's house, and at Carrie's side. A quarrel between him and Alec would have led to some insolence towards Joyce which must have dislodged her, and so despoiled Lady Wing. For he knew very well that Wing had guessed his affection for Carrie's young cousin, thought him a fool, and would probably say so, on small provocation. And to tell the truth, he was not sure enough yet of his chances with Joyce to risk an upheaval.

The Duchess came in—furious—and told Wing

some home truths, which he took with philosophy, she being his aunt and a duchess. But her onslaughts did not move him.

Three days of feverish preparations, and he was gone. On the night before his departure, Caroline, who had become a pale and speechless ghost, the pity of all who watched her, for the first time in their joint lives shut her door against her husband. She spent the night in a chair beside the fire, sleepless and motionless, haunted by visions of the past, and seeing no hope in the future. That Alec *could* do such a thing—could resist her love, and all her sorrow—broke the spring of life, and in some bitter way dissolved the bond between them. Without love—without the justification of a great unbroken love—what was she indeed but Alec's mistress—an immoral and dishonoured woman?

Wing looked at her the following morning askance, but said nothing. They parted with a formal kiss, she like a stone, and when Joyce, herself sobbing, led her back into her sitting-room, she quietly disengaged herself from the girl's tender clasp, and saying she would rather be alone, she shut herself in for some hours, emerging a calm and lifeless creature, to whom no one dared offer sympathy.

In the evening arrived a note from Southampton, brought back by messenger. Caroline read—"Good-bye, Carrie. I know you think me a brute. Perhaps I am, but I believe it will be for the best. If you care at all to do what I want—I admit I have precious little right to ask you—you won't give up Eltham House, and you'll go on with your 'evenings.' They're the only bit of success we've managed between us, so you might as well stick to them. But do as you like. The yacht's in splendid trim, and the smell of



the sea has already put new life into me. Mind you go somewhere for Easter. Good-bye."

A fortnight later, Caroline found herself on the Cornish coast, in a small summer house which had belonged to Alec's grandmother. In the autumn she had marked it as a place to breathe the spring in; and she went there blindly, dragging her broken wings. Like other stricken things she went to hide herself in Nature's quiet places, appealing for comfort to that life

Whose dumb aim is not missed,  
If birth proceeds, if things subsist.

She would sit for hours in a fringe of oak-wood on the end of a cliff, now watching the glistening gulls inland, on the bits of fresh ploughed field, and now the same gulls on the tide far below, "their white breasts dancing on the restless sea." Sometimes under the April sunshine, she would lose herself among the gorse, and the young oak-leaf, and sometimes she would go with Joyce further afield, take long walks along the coast, and talk to fishermen in the little steep villages hidden in the cracks and chines of the cliffs. But it was all the talk and the action of an automaton; that it had little or nothing to do with the real Carrie was evident.

The real Carrie was drowned—submerged—in a perpetual dream, a ceaseless struggle of thought, of which only the rarest signs appeared on the surface of the outer life. She tried not to be idle, and it was during these weeks that she made her first serious attempts to know the poor, and to imagine their lives. The Cornish fisherman has a free soul, and gives it away neither to riches nor to rank. But she won some

friends among them, who were attracted by her beauty and kindness; men and women who secretly wished her "childer," to cheer her up. The villages were mainly Methodist, with a good deal of Revivalism going on, and Carrie would sometimes slip into a chapel in some hamlet where she was not likely to be recognised, and listen to the preaching. It often touched and surprised her; but it was not in these neat slated Bethels that her own "voices" came to her. Beside the sea—at night—in the woods—she was conscious again and again of the same mysterious Life—appealing to life—which had first spoken to her in London; the gleamings of a spiritual vision that was no sooner felt than it was gone. She did not know herself for the same Carrie as the Carrie of the winter; and she often seemed to herself to have stepped out from the living, and to be waiting by the roadside, for she knew not what—a step, a light in the distance?—a recognition, or a joy, austere and wonderful, which yet always escaped her.

Occasional telegrams came from Alec from different South American ports. But his movements were so uncertain that she could rarely do more than cable in reply; and indeed for a time she did not attempt to do more. Once or twice she talked of going back to London and re-opening Eltham House; but she was so obviously unfit for any kind of effort that Joyce, and Lewson—Durrant also, who kept in as constant touch with the two ladies as his military duties allowed—did nothing to encourage the notion, and it soon died away again.

One evening, one glorious evening at the beginning of May, before a sea of rose and pearl, she was sitting with a book on her knee, one frail hand idly plucking at a tuft of seagrass beside her, when the afternoon-

letters were brought her. She perceived one in Lord Melton's handwriting, and opened it eagerly.

"MY DEAR LADY WING—I have at last had an opportunity of talking to Marsworth. I regret to say he is obdurate. I never saw anyone less accessible to reason or kindness in such a matter. Please believe that I did my best; but he would yield nothing—nothing!—as to Carina. Indeed I think that if any fresh effort were made to alter his resolution, he might cut you off from her altogether. He is in a curious restless state, half on with Rome and half off. They treat him very gingerly, and give him all the latitude they can. It is important to them to keep so big a capture if it is any way possible. But I doubt whether they will. At present he is up to the neck in a number of religious controversies which seem to keep him occupied. But it is a dreary state of life, and he is an unhappy man.

"You cannot know how much I would do and give to bring you pleasure—or comfort—if only for a few hours. But I am afraid you won't let me do anything, and I am a poor hand at writing. All I know is that your friends in town never forget you, and would only be too thankful if you could show them how to serve you.—I hope you have good news of Wing."

Carrie put the letter down, and sat staring through tears into the crimson leagues of air and sea before her. Her whole nature was athirst for Alec, athirst for her child. "I *must* try and live for other things," she said to herself. But how, and for what? All other things seemed to have lost their savour; and that deep weariness of which she had been conscious so often during the winter dragged her down like a weight.

It was that night, after Joyce—the faithful and tender—had left her, that Caroline was first conscious of the ill that destroyed her. Sudden, sharp pain came upon her, and the first discovery of those symptoms that stand, for helpless mortals, like omens of doom, between the life that was, and the death that shall be.

The following day Joyce telegraphed for the Duchess, who came down, and behaved like the good woman she was. Within a week Caroline was in a nursing home, and the knife had done its part. No one knew where Alec Wing was, and she insisted that no one but herself should write to him—when she was able. After three weeks she struggled back to an ordinary existence again, and after another fortnight she was walking about as usual, except that those who saw her beheld in her only the lovely shadow of her former self. All that had happened had been kept profoundly secret, and by the beginning of June Carrie announced her firm intention of going up to London, and seeing friends again in the old way at Eltham House.

“She can’t do it, my dear,” said the Duchess despairingly to Joyce. “But we shall have to let her try.”

And then remembering what the surgeons had said to her, as Lady Wing’s nearest available relative, on a certain recent occasion, she broke down and cried. What the surgeons had said she had never reported to Joyce; and Joyce did not question her now. The girl sat still, her kind young hand seeking for that of the Duchess. She did not need to ask; her love for Carrie had taught her all there was to learn.

“And where, I should like to know, is her worthless husband!” cried the Duchess, catching at anger as the only way out of tears. “And who on earth is going to make that poker John Marsworth hear reason!”

## CHAPTER XVII

IT was a Friday afternoon in June; the House of Commons had risen early, and Washington and Llewellyn meeting casually in Palace Yard walked together across St. James's Park. London was once more decked in the fresh beauty of its summer leaf. White clouds overhead in a stainless blue, leaves quivering in a sunlit air, white and red hawthorns in the parks, lilac and laburnums in all the squares, gay lines of shops and crowded streets; a swift inrush of lights and shadows over the stately offices in Whitehall, the houses in Carlton House Terrace and the distant line of Piccadilly; a fragrance of mimosa in the air from the laden baskets of the flower-sellers; fluttering summer dresses, and everywhere the sharp recrudescence of life that comes with the heat:—Llewellyn, as he walked, was conscious of all these things, as an artist might have been. Washington observed none of them; he moved, absorbed in cogitations of his own, till, as they turned back along the Mall, he said abruptly—

"I hear Eltham House is open again."

"Yes, Lady Wing is there. And I saw her in Bond Street yesterday."

"You saw her? Good!" Washington's voice rose to a higher key—a key of satisfaction. "I heard a horrid rumour that she had been ill."

"She looks frail; but extraordinarily lovely! She stopped the car and spoke to me."

"Good!" said Washington again, with an even livelier accent. "Does that mean that you and I may go and see her—and that she won't show us the door?"

"She told me she should be at home to-night, and on Sunday as usual."

"I shall write to her at once!" said Washington, with decision.

"Do. She told me she had no idea where Wing was. The last word of him came by cable from Valparaiso, but he himself was far inland."

Washington's thin but large mouth set contemptuously.

"Mad fellow!" he said curtly. "Of all the inglorious flights from a field of battle, that was the worst I remember. Yet I see his newspaper still keeps up."

"Certainly!—but run by Donovan now in his own interests. They say he has been adopted by some Yorkshire town—I forget the name—and will be in Parliament directly. You may be quite sure, he drove a stiff bargain with Wing, financially, when Wing bought him. And now he is his own master, with a clear field."

"Well, well, if I were she, the more Andes Wing found to climb, the better."

"I wish to Heaven it was as simple as that!" said Llewellyn with vehemence.

"You mean?"—Washington shrugged his shoulders sadly. "Well, I shall go home and write to her. She *needn't* quarrel with me. Nobody, under the circumstances, could have written a more civil letter than I wrote to Wing. I took particular pains—for her sake—to smooth him down."

"And I wrote to her next day—the day the list was out. But she never answered me. So I didn't know

yesterday whether she would cut me or not. But nothing could have been more charming."

There was a softened tone of recollection in his voice.

"Well, we all know how charming she can be," said Washington dryly.

They walked on in silence, both thinking of the woman to whom they were both so deeply and loyally attached; whom they would both so willingly have befriended. But what could they do for a woman who wanted nothing in the wide world but what could not be given her, even by a Prime Minister?—including, chiefly, a husband worthy of her!

Washington reached the official residence to find a deserted house. His three sons were all away at school; his wife was out. Avoiding his secretaries, and flinging some correspondence which awaited him on one side, he sat down by windows opening on the garden to write to Caroline Wing.

He wrote with that ardent chivalry and kindness that some men can feel for women; a tone of mind which owes nothing to passion, though something, no doubt, to sex. He expressed in warm terms the pleasure that all her friends would feel in seeing her in London again; hoped that none of the rumours of her having been ill were true; asked after Wing, in a few friendly words; and then went on to talk of the political situation, and his own hopes and fears for his Government, in a tone of intimacy, of complete confidence and equality, such as—coming from a Prime Minister whose power and reputation were increasing every day—could not but flatter and please the woman to whom it was addressed. He greatly wished to please her. There was in his mind a strange compunction and foreboding about her, which he could not at all

explain; as though one must hurry to make her smile, to give her pleasure, before something happened.

He finished the letter, read it over, liked it, put it up, and left it for immediate posting. Then throwing himself into a low chair beside the open window, with a cigar, and a book on some recent Greek finds in the Troad, he gave himself up to an hour's rest; and was half asleep when his wife came in upon him.

"Richard!—I thought I should have been home before you!" she said in vexation as she stooped to kiss him. "But I was kept."

"Committees?" he said, with a smile, looking up at her.

She assented wearily, and taking off her hat, she sat beside him, possessing herself of one of his hands, and looking at him with anxious affection.

"You've had a terribly hard time, Richard!—you didn't get any real holiday even at Whitsuntide. Let me take you away—down to the cottage—to-morrow."

"The cottage"—a tiny country house on the Surrey commons—had been recently bought and entirely arranged by the wife, as a means of occasional escape for the husband from the pressure of office.

"I think I won't go away to-morrow," he said quietly, with his eyes shut. "I want very much to go and see Lady Wing on Sunday."

Elizabeth Washington flushed violently—involuntarily. But her husband did not perceive it.

"I saw you had written to her," she said, after a moment.

"Llewellyn told me she'd come to town, and that he'd seen her. He and I have both been doubtful whether she would ever speak to either of us again. But he reported her as quite friendly. There's a story she's been ill, and has taken Wing's going-off in this



absurd manner very much to heart. So I think I shall stay in town, and pay her a visit on Sunday."

He drew his hat over his eyes, as though he were going to sleep, invited thereto by the quiet garden, and the drowsy warmth of the fine day. But his wife interposed.

"Don't you think, Richard, that—might be misunderstood?"

He made a sudden movement.

"Misunderstood! Good Heavens! Nobody can suppose that Lady Wing wants a post in the Government! What do you mean, Lizzy?"

"Lord Wing has still a party—the remains of one. Won't it be thought that—well, that you're still afraid of him?"

Washington laughed contemptuously.

"I was a great fool ever to be afraid of him. I might have known he would turn out in the end to be his own worst enemy. My dear Lizzy, I assure you that nobody in the world will trouble their heads politically, if I attend Lady Wing's Sundays. Wing has destroyed himself and his own movement—neck and crop."

"All the same"—said Mrs. Washington, with gentle persistence—"I wish, Richard, you wouldn't go."

Her husband opened his eyes wide, pushed his hat back and surveyed her. Her sudden colour had quite gone; and there was that in her face which stirred a dormant pugnacity in him.

"My dear—I have just written to tell her to expect me!"

"Ought you—in your position?" she said, resolutely. "You can't deny that what you do is important, Richard. Everybody will think you approve of such conduct as Lady Wing's."

"My dear Lizzy, we're not all prigs and busybodies,

meddling with each other's concerns—as you seem to suppose!” he said, with some heat. “I repeat nobody will take any notice of my going to see Lady Wing—or see any harm in it whatever. There may have been some sense in the dead-set that was made against Wing; though I'm often very sorry I gave way to it. It has always been a mystery to me how it got up and who stirred it up. But Lady Wing wants nothing from me, or the party. And she has been perfectly irreproachable since her marriage.”

“Has she?” said his wife, quickly.

“Perfectly irreproachable!” Washington repeated, almost with passion. “I suppose you're thinking of the gossip about Melton. Nobody who had ever seen her and Melton together could listen to such nonsense for a moment. I tell you she has never cared a brass button for anybody but Wing—worse luck! All the same she is a woman who makes friends—and keeps them.”

He got up in his irritation, and began to walk about in front of her, till suddenly he stopped beside her.

“Why don't you make friends with her too, Lizzy? Come with me on Sunday!”

“Women don't condone such things, Richard—as easily as men do.”

“What?—the elopement—and the divorce? Very wrong, of course, I admit; though I confess, the only time I ever met John Marsworth he bored me to death. But the thing's over and done with. And the poor woman's paying for it, I can tell you.”

“With all that money!—and Eltham House!” cried his wife, with sparkling eyes.

“That only shows you don't know her. If Wing disappoints her, these things will only be intolerable burdens. She's one of those women who live by their

affections—and are very apt to die of them! They're not common nowadays—and, by George, they're attractive to men at any rate—when you find them!" He took another turn the length of the small lawn, and again paused in front of her.

"Come with me, Lizzy!"

"Lady Wing hasn't asked me—and wouldn't ask me," said his wife coldly. "And I could never forget—if I did go—that she deserted her dying baby to go with her lover!"

"Now, Lizzy!—how do you know that's true?"

"It came out at the trial!"

"Yes, I recollect. The judge was severe. But it was contradicted then by her lawyers; and it's denied now. I had an interesting talk with young Durrant about this very thing—not long ago. He has first hand information; and he denies it altogether. She did not desert the child, knowing it to be ill—she rushed back to it—and his death, and the circumstances of it nearly killed her!"

Mrs. Washington smiled.

"You don't believe me?" said Washington, exasperated.

"I think it's easy for a beautiful woman to make people believe what she likes."

Washington stood over her for a few moments longer, looking down upon her, with sparkling eyes. Then with a shrug of the shoulders he left, paced up and down a few minutes longer, and then quickly disappeared through the door leading to his secretaries' room.

Elizabeth Washington sat on, lost in disagreeable meditation. The scene which had just passed made the nearest approach to a quarrel that had ever happened between her and Richard. And she owed it to Lady

Wing. Surely she was right—altogether right, in her responsible position, to fight hard against laxity and immorality in high places. It was right that Lord Wing should be excluded from political life; it was right that the houses and feasts of scrupulous decent folk should be closed to him and his wife; it was right that they should be banished from the Court. How else could law be vindicated—against such prosperous and splendid sinners?

But Elizabeth Washington was no mere hypocrite. She differed widely from such a woman as Lady Theodora. The spiritual energy in her was real; her conscience lived. She was well aware that her husband—always singularly generous and unsuspecting with regard to those he loved—had no idea of the part she had taken in the sudden movement which had swept Lord Wing out of public life; and she dreaded lest he should know it. Not that she was ashamed of it; but she ought long ago to have confessed it. The concealment weighed upon her; hurt both her conscience and her pride. And now there was this rift between them—and these hours that he would soon be spending with Caroline Wing; worked on by a charm, a subtle appealing sweetness, entirely beyond her own reach or rivalry.

She felt shaken and unhappy. But she said no more; and when Washington left her at home, after their Sunday walk in Kensington Gardens, and went off by himself, it was understood between them that he was bound for Eltham House.

Washington found his hostess in the garden, under a group of lime trees in flower, and as she rose to greet him, it was with difficulty he restrained a cry. Good God!—what had come over her? She was in white,

with clouds of some white gauzy stuff round her shoulders and neck. Her beautiful eyes shone welcome; and the face they illumined was still lovely. The whole aspect of her indeed was no less steeped in charm than it had ever been; but mingled with it, what an impression of fragility, of evanescence! The memory of her as he had first seen her, the year before, swept down upon him; and as he took a seat beside her, putting force upon himself to show nothing of the distress he felt, it was as though he became aware of dim heralds and messengers of doom hovering above her dark head, amid the fragrant shadows of the limes.

Where, in Heaven's name, was her husband?—and what had happened to her?—*alone!*

But after a little the impression lessened; and in the end almost died away. Caroline insisted gaily, to him and every other inquirer—"Oh, I'm so well! I've been down in Cornwall, by the sea—a quiet old house of Alec's—and it's done me a world of good. Of course I'm thin! I've taken such walks! Alec?—he's in the Andes, climbing. I had a cable the other day from a place called Concepcion. But I expect him home before long."

She told the same story to all her old friends, as the afternoon wore on, and the famous garden filled with a remarkable company. The French Ambassador came, enfolded her slender hand in both his, looked into her face, with some of the dexterous compliments of his race upon his lips, and somehow failed to say them—kissing the hand instead. Llewellyn found a chair near her and kept it against all comers. Washington was never far from her. Writers, artists, politicians, diplomats, all eagerly waited their turn with her, and went away, sobered and restless, to pace the shady walks of the garden; conscious of some vital

change in the fair lady of their little court, and not willing to speak of it, even to each other. But with them, as with Washington, the infection of Carrie's smiles, her evident pleasure in being among them again, the quickness with which she remembered all the little details concerning them—this man's trouble, and that man's success—the launching of a new book—a son's coming of age—an actor's triumph in a new play—a brother's promotion—grandchildren here—the birth of a first baby there:—these old wiles of hers were so effective in the end that cheerfulness came back; so that everybody fell again with zest on what had turned out to be the real business of the Eltham House *salon*—free discussion of all topics and persons under the sun, simply with a view to the enjoyment of the hour, and the sharpening of wits.

The garden was still full of folk, when Llewellyn, emerging from a good talk with an Indian general just returned from Bombay, perceived the entrance of Lord Melton. He saw also Caroline's greeting of the young man—her flashing look—and the response in the youth's prematurely grave countenance:—saw it with a moment of discomfort. Was it wise of her to receive him in her husband's absence? After all, there had been a good deal of gossip, mainly, no doubt, because an idle world with an appetite for scandal cannot possibly resist such a morsel as Caroline Wing's position and Caroline Wing's story offered them. But anyhow there had been gossip; the youth was clearly hit; and Llewellyn wished him banished.

Then—as he watched her with Melton, and with two or three other magnificent young men, who, if she had ever given them the smallest encouragement would all have been at her feet, a curious impression shaped itself in Llewellyn. It was as though he beheld

a new and strange freedom, a new and strange dignity in this frail ghost of Caroline Wing; and he, like Washington, found himself sorely thinking of the woman he had known the year before—impulsive, shrinking, slave to a great passion, now defiant of the world which exiled her, and now painfully conscious of its ban; but always most human and most vulnerable. What he saw now was something which seemed to have escaped the world; and to be moving with free feet in a world of its own.

Washington and Durrant walked away together.

"You and Lewson," asked Washington abruptly, "have been looking after her?"

Durrant nodded assent.

"She was seriously ill?"

The young Guardsman evaded the question.

"She is now perfectly well," he said, almost angrily. "Next month Miss Allen will be taking her to Scotland. That will quite set her up."

Washington dropped the subject; but after some silent walking, he threw a sharp look at his companion—"Can't you get that man home?"

"No—the brute!" cried Durrant, thrown off his guard. Recovering himself, he added—

"We can't get at him. He seems to be somewhere far in the interior—climbing. However, I sent out a special messenger by the mail boat last week."

Here they were overtaken by the French Ambassador, who had left Eltham House a little later than they and was now walking in a great hurry.

The Prime Minister laid a friendly hand upon his arm. "Whither away? Can you give me ten minutes' conversation." Lowering his voice, he mentioned an important foreign matter, then before the Cabinet.

The Ambassador hesitated.

"Let me go first to Albemarle Street," he said, pleadingly. "I promised to borrow a French book from a friend there for Lady Wing."

"Is it so pressing?"

"Mon Dieu!—yes," cried the Frenchman, his dark southern face clouding over: "Let us all make haste!—if she has a wish—the most trifling wish——!"

"I will go with you," said Washington, and they walked on to Albemarle Street together.

Meanwhile Caroline and Lord Melton were walking slowly in the lime walk. She had thrown her white gauze scarf round her head; and he scarcely dared look at her, so spirit-like was she, and so great the growing terror in his own heart.

"They are in town?" she said.

"Sir John came up yesterday, with his mother and Carina. They have taken a house in Upper Brook Street."

He gave the number. Caroline pondered.

"You are sure?"

"Henry Marsworth told me."

Caroline shivered a little. She knew well that Henry Marsworth's hatred, his implacable resentment of his brother's disaster had pursued both her and Alec, ever since their return to England. The name struck dismally on her ear.

"Is Henry with them?"

"I don't know." Then, eyeing her uncomfortably, the young man broke into entreaty. "Dear Lady Wing, don't write to Sir John!—don't attempt to see him!—he is not to be moved. You will only make pain for yourself."

Caroline looked straight before her into the high gloom of the limes—a shining look.



"I must have her!" she said, softly.

"If there was only someone who could influence him!" said Melton, despairingly. "But I can't hear of anyone."

Caroline did not seem to hear him.

"—And I must have her before Alec comes back"—she added, in the same murmuring voice.

"I hate the thought of your wrestling with him! You are not strong enough."

The tone was reproachful—indignant. Caroline smiled.

"You don't know how strong I am—I can do anything! And now—pray, what have you been doing with yourself, since April?"

She put him through a gay catechism, and at the end she said, with mock solemnity—

"All these things ought you to have done, and not to have left the other undone."

"What other?"

Caroline threw him a sweet, bantering look.

"What, in all my letters, have I been urging you to do?"

The young man was silent. But his thin, agreeable face expressed a certain resentment.

"There is a cousin people tell me of," said Caroline, slyly. "A very pretty cousin. They say her name is Sybil—and that last year people thought—"

"Don't go on! That was in the dark ages," he said recklessly. "You make me quote:—

"You violets that fresh appear  
As if the spring were all your own,  
What are you when the rose is blown?"

Caroline stepped apart from him. He saw that he had displeased her.

"One does not say things like that—to a person in my"—she hesitated, and then said gravely—"in my position. You must please not say them again."

What did she mean? That she was still—and always would be as much in love with Alec Wing as ever? Or something else?—something quite different?

He looked at her doubtfully, and asked her pardon.

"Yes!—if some day, you bring—Sybil—to see me. But I forgot"—there was a sudden crease of pain on the white brow—"she wouldn't come."

Melton stammered out that she certainly would come—that she was a charming girl, and he was very fond of her—but—

"'But me no buts'!" said Caroline, all smiles again. "I'll ask you when I want—to see her. I don't think she'll refuse. But there's so much to do before—"

"Before what?"

She took no notice of his question.

"My mind is full of nothing but match-making," she declared lightly—"for you—and others!" Through the lime-leaves, her eyes travelled to Joyce Allen, who was still on the lawn.

"Leave me out—leave me out!" cried Melton passionately.

She looked distressed, and holding out her hand, said she must go and rest. He went away, raging at himself; and more miserable than he had ever been in his clean, equable, happy life. What was wrong with her? What had they done to her? That villain, Wing!—to leave her like this!

The following afternoon, Caroline going into a shop in Bond Street sent her car away, saying that she would walk home. When she emerged from the shop

she turned into the nearest wide street, leading westward. She met no one she knew; no one was there to notice the languor or the hesitation with which she moved. Once or twice she stopped, as though either her feet or her will failed her. But she always pushed on again—slowly—looking at the numbers on the house-doors.

"I am mad to try it"—she said to herself—"Alec would be angry. But if he isn't here, I must do my best—with my poor life—till he comes."

The house she finally paused before was gay with flower-filled balconies, and fresh white curtains. Caroline looked it up and down with flagging courage, but finally rang the bell. Supposing John had altered all his habits since she knew him? In the old days when his old mother came to be their guest in London, he had never—or rarely—failed to come home to tea with her, smoking a cigarette in his study afterwards, and then going out again to the club. Lady Marsworth had been a feeble woman for many years; she came down late and generally retired to her room again before dinner; so that her devoted son, who could seldom be at home for luncheon owing to some city directorships, used to make a point of seeing his mother at afternoon tea, if it could possibly be managed. But everything of that sort might have changed? Well, if this bit of recollection did not help her, she must try something else.

"Is Sir John Marsworth at home?"

The butler looked at her with some astonishment.

"He was in, ma'am, a few minutes ago." He turned his head towards the inner hall, where a man's hat and stick lay reposing on the hall table. "Yes, ma'am. I see Sir John is at home. Whom shall I say?"

Caroline stepped into the hall.

"Would you kindly take him that note"—she produced one from her bag—"I will wait here for an answer."

The man again looked doubtful, but the distinction of the lady, and the elegance of her dress were evident. He asked Caroline to take a chair, and disappeared with the note.

Caroline remained sitting in the front hall, on a stiff mahogany chair placed against the wall. A tall clock ticked behind her—the most intimate and domestic of sounds. Suppose Lady Marsworth came downstairs? The years seemed to have rolled back . . . she sat in a dream.

The man reappeared, holding the swing door open for someone behind—a tall dark man. He came forward. Caroline and he looked at each other. Convention was sorely strained, but the presence of the butler insured its holding.

"Will you come into the study?" said the master of the house, coldly. Caroline passed through the swing door, leaving the butler on the other side to some rather excited reflections.

Caroline found herself in a large and pleasant library, where she hurriedly looked for a chair, being quite unable to stand. Marsworth—who had grown very pale—threw away his cigarette with a jerk.

"I should very much like to know, Lady Wing, what could possibly be your purpose in coming to see me here?"

Caroline lifted her veil and threw it back. There was something deliberate in the action which fixed the attention of the man standing opposite to her upon her face. She saw him start. Her own eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she held out her hand to him,

which he mechanically touched, and she instantly withdrew.

"I am here, John, because—something has happened—which makes it easy for me to come—this once. I am not likely to live more than a few months—and I want you to let me have Carina—now, while I am alone in London—before it is too late."

"What do you mean?" He sat down bewildered on the other side of a table which separated them. "What makes you say such a thing?"

She quickly recapitulated certain facts of her recent history, naming near the end one of the most eminent of London surgeons. "Sir Lionel said he would write to you about me, if you wished it. I insisted that he should tell me the truth. They don't often do it. But I made him."

John Marsworth stared at her stupidly for a few seconds, at the delicate familiar face, the eyes, the brow. Incomparable, all of it, still!—but how changed! Like Washington, like Llewellyn, he was strangely aware of a woman unafraid; a woman who had shed all ordinary shynesses and timidities, and was moving at large among the most poignant of realities. Then, gradually, his head fell; he hid his face in his hands.

"I did not of course come"—said Caroline, her lips trembling a little—"to make a scene—to attempt any foolish reconciliation. You do not wish to see me—and Alec—my husband—would be very angry if he knew I had come here. He was very angry when he heard of our meeting at Oxford. But I want my child—I want Carina—very, very badly, John; and I want her now, while I am all alone at Eltham House, and before Alec comes back. You said you would not let her be under the same roof with him. Of course I understand that. We do not know where he is—exactly—at pre-

sent, but we are sure he cannot be home for three weeks at least. And directly I get a cable—he is certain to cable—I would send Carina back. Or if I were suddenly—much worse—I would send her back at once. It is not good for children to be mixed up with illness and suffering. But the probability is, I shall be able to live much as usual for a while. I should like, just for these weeks, to live only for her—to make her happy—so that when she grows up, and will know everything, she may have it to look back on. Perhaps you will think I don't deserve it—you don't want her to remember me. But you can't help it. She will try and find out about her mother. And if you don't tell her, she will ask other people. At present I am a stranger to her; but if she learns to love me a little, then—when it is all over, you can tell her something, and when she is grown up, you can tell her more—and it would all be less bitter and sad for her."

Through what long years was John Marsworth to remember that figure in the light summer dress!—aye, and the very material of the dress—a white soft stuff, striped with black; the violets in the black belt which set so loosely on the wasted body; the large black hat, and under its shadow, the ghostly beauty of the face which was Carrie's and yet not Carrie. She sat in an Indian chair of carved ebony, a green velvet cushion behind her, her thin arm resting on the ebony, bending towards him with a soft and pleading composure. No!—she was not afraid—and she was not self-conscious, not posing. The tragic sincerity of her action and her prayer stuck deep into the man's ironic and stubborn nature. He would have liked to believe it a ruse—a device. But he could not. She conquered him.

He looked up; and while, after that first dilemma, she had shown no symptom of tears—whatever, his strong

face was wet with them. As she perceived it, for the first time, Caroline shrank. She flushed and looked down timidly.

"You shall have her," he said brokenly. Then rising, he felt for his handkerchief, and went away to the window where he stood with his back to her for a little.

When he came back, he had recovered himself. Caroline had risen, and stood with one hand leaning on the table waiting for what he had more to say.

"I hope from my heart, Lady Wing, that you are mistaken——"

She interrupted.

"Shall I ask Sir Lionel to write to you?"

"No, no!" he said, with a return of agitation. "I see you believe it. But you may be wrong. Please believe——"

He broke off.

"Good God! How can I say these things?"

He turned away, and again she waited. When he returned it was with a changed manner. He caught both her hands before she could withhold them, and looked down into her face, his own grey and drawn.

"Good-bye, Carrie. Perhaps we shan't ever see each other again. As I said, I hope it isn't true. You are young—you may escape yet. But what you have told me—is terrible. I should be a brute if I refused you. . . . I don't refuse. Forgive me all my faults towards you—as I forgive your sin against me. God bless you—God protect you. Carina shall come to-morrow—some time in the afternoon. I shall hear from you when she comes back. Of course I trust your promise to me."

Carrie gently pressed his hands, and withdrew her own.

"Thank you very much." Look and voice were simple and grave. "Indeed I will keep my promise. It will be a great comfort to me—and—and what you have said."

The dimness was in her eyes again. But she pulled down her veil over them; and with a quiet good-bye she went to the door and disappeared. He did not attempt to follow her.

Carrie went quickly home. Joyce was anxiously looking out for her. Why had she attempted to walk home from Bond Street? It was mad; she had not strength for it.

But the Carrie who walked into the drawing-room was a transformed being—red cheeks, and shining eyes!—an embodied joy!

"Joyce, she's coming!—my little, little girl! Carina's coming. I went to John and asked it. Come upstairs, darling, and let's choose her rooms; she shall sleep in the one next to mine, the white room looking on the garden. We must change the pictures. Tomorrow I'll put the beautiful old doll's house there that Aunt Libby used. And there are some toys put away. I found them in a cupboard. I must go out early and get some new ones too. And we'll put flowers—everything to make it bright. Joyce, I think I shall die of joy! Darling, don't worry me about resting. Come now—come at once!"

Carrie's night was made restless by sheer happiness. No sleeping draught was of use. And in the early morning, propped up in bed, she wrote her last letter to Alec Wing.



## CHAPTER XVIII

**I**NTO that letter Carrie Wing tried to put all her love, all that she had learnt from pain, and from that stirring message of a sudden and irrevocable doom, which was now ringing always in her ears.

It ran thus :

“My beloved—It is so early and so still. Yet the sun is coming in at the windows, and far, far away one hears the sounds in the streets beginning. Busy old earth!—Mother Earth! I don’t want to leave it. How I have loved the sea, and the clouds, and the gorse, and the spring green—this year more than all years! I have had *time* to love them, because you were away, and the hours were so empty. At first, that is to say. After a little, the mere watching and feeling made one’s life so full. So many new things came into it—the trees, and the splendid cliffs, and the waves, the sea-gulls, the fishermen’s children, the clouds piled above the sea, and the game of the sun with the clouds, day after day, sometimes so grave and splendid, like a Greek festival—and sometimes so full of tricks and surprises, as though angels were at play in heaven. Since you came into my life, I have hardly looked at such things, or thought about them. But when I was a girl they spoke to me. Don’t think, beloved, when I say they filled my life, they ever for a moment took *your* place. They came crowding into the outer halls; they were very dear and comforting; but in the inner

chambers of my heart I could always go quietly to you, and shut the door. I could look into your eyes, and hold your hand. And so, with those times within, and the stream of beautiful things without, flowing over me, whether I would or no, I managed to live; I did not let any sorrow, any despair destroy me quite.

"For I have been in sorrow—and despair too. If you have received our letters before this, you will know all that has happened. But I somehow believe that you never have received them; or you would have sent me a word—I think—by cable. All the same, I write as if you got them—that my spirit may talk to yours. Jim tells me he has now sent you a special messenger. It was not at my bidding. But when he finds you he will give you all the ugly facts—the doctors' letters and so forth—and you will come hurrying home—I know you will. I do not believe for one moment you have forgotten to love me. When I think of seeing you again, I could faint with joy. I shall see you again—you will put your dear arms round me—and I shall go to sleep, without pain, upon your heart.

"Nevertheless, dearest, I have been through sorrow—and despair too. After you left me, I could hardly bear my life. That you *could* leave me—when I begged you not—that was the bitter thing—the thing which seemed to change everything, the old blessed times in Italy—everything! And the agony about Dicky came back upon me—and Carina. For what had I given them up—to be so forsaken?—to feel so humbled and of no account? It was no use scolding oneself, or laughing at oneself. I got to know a great many poor people, and at first I used to reproach myself for making so much of your going away—taking it so tragically—when there were such ghastly misfortunes and grief

close to me; poverty, and helplessness, and miserable old age, and sudden horrible deaths at sea; mothers losing their sons, and wives their husbands, all in a moment. But then I came to think that—substantially—we are all equal as to happiness—or unhappiness. There are of course the people who can't love and can't feel—plenty of them—in the world. But for the rest, rich or poor, it is all the same—especially for women. It is only love that really matters—the touch of the man we love best—the look in our children's eyes. When I missed you most, I was nearest to the cottage women; they constantly said, in their splendid simplicity, things for which I could find no words.

“Then suddenly came the shock—and, for a time, despair. Life was very strong in me. I could not submit. I raged like some one in a dark prison who throws himself against the door, trying madly to get out. I fought against my fate, till I was blind and dumb and battered all over. The doctors and nurses said I was brave. I wasn't. I was horribly afraid. And my heart broke under what seemed to me the hideous, hideous injustice of it. I so young—already out of the world—already put aside—with no future, no middle life with you, no old age. I had lost Carina; but I might—had this not been—have had Carina's children in my arms. And now—never! How impossible it seemed! . . . You remember—you can't have forgotten my birthday, darling?—I was twenty-nine just the month after you went away; before I knew there was anything wrong. And I said to myself, the morning of my birthday, 'I am so strong and well—life is longer than it used to be—I shall have forty years more—perhaps fifty. If Alec comes back to me, with the old love, and if he and I live on together, I shall want more time, more years—even—when these are done. I shall

never want to go out of this warm life! But if not—if *not*—how shall I get through the years?’

“And then—I had to see plainly—there was not *one year left*—not one.

“And now I am always so quiet, and, but for the times when I thirst for you, I am so strangely peaceful—and serene. I cannot tell you how it happened. I went down into darkness; but I was never alone. It has been just the mysterious strengthening—and comforting—which comes to others, and has now come to me. And in the end I knew Who it was that held me. Many things came back to me—things I had learnt and felt at Oxford in the old days. But I will tell you more about this when you come.

“And before you come—you, my last, my supremest joy!—I shall have another joy, only second to what you hold in your hands for me, beloved, to give or not to give—I shall have Carina—she comes to-morrow, for a little while. I went to John Marsworth and begged him. Why shouldn’t I—now? And he gave way. To-morrow night she will be sleeping in that next room to mine; I can steal in and look at her when I like. . . . Everybody is wonderfully kind. When you come back, dear Alec, you will find all the old friends. And the house is beautiful. I have changed the pictures a little here and there—grouped them differently. I think you will like it. I am strong enough still—quite strong enough—for one evening a week, and the Sunday afternoons. Soon they will give me morphia, and then I shall get through it even better—for a little while.

“Joyce is such an angel, Alec! You can never thank her enough for my sake. She has never let Jim Durrant propose to her yet—for my sake—and because she thought you disapproved. But you couldn’t dis-

approve now. I must straighten it out—and I must do it soon.

“You will get this *sometime*, dearest, because I am sending it to the care of the British Consul at Valparaiso, with instructions to return it to you—here—in case it arrives after you have sailed, or he cannot discover your whereabouts within a fortnight. But it may not reach you—or Jim’s special messenger may not find you—in time; one never knows. So I add a few things that must be said—that burn in my mind till they are said. First, you must never blame yourself for this that has happened to me. It would have happened anyway; the mischief had begun months ago. I blame you for nothing, my beloved, and I thank and bless you for so much. I love you with all my heart—I shall love you to the last—last—minute.

“As to what we did, I have had to think it out—all again. The other day, in one of my drawers, among old letters, I came across an old notebook of my father’s. I don’t remember ever opening it before. It contained a number of extracts—passages from poetry, or philosophy, or the Bible, which seemed to have helped him. You can’t think how it touched me to read them—how near it brought me to him. After all I never knew him very well; and it was strange and sweet to find the same needs, the same doubts, the same prayers in his mind, as in mine. One passage—from Plato, I think—has been often in my thoughts. Socrates’ friend Crito—you will have read it all at Oxford!—is persuading him to run away from prison, and so escape from execution. And Socrates refuses, because he has been condemned according to the laws of Athens, and to break them—even to save his life—is to do injury to the City and the State, which must perish if law is not obeyed. And he makes the laws themselves into

persons—august protesting ghosts—who come and say—‘Socrates, did not we watch over you at your birth, through your education, your marriage, the births of your children?—what would you have possessed or enjoyed without us? And now, because we who brought you good fortune so long, bring you ill-fortune, will you try, as far as in you lies, to destroy and overthrow us?—and so to destroy the State—the Athens—you love?’

“And Socrates dies, because he will not break even an unjust law, and so injure the City which has given him all good things. Ever since I read this, in my father’s quavering hand, those Great Ghosts—the oaths, the laws, we broke—come and visit me, and look into my heart. Yes, we were bad citizens! We made it worse for others; easier to sin, harder to resist. And I lost my children. John’s life was broken, and you have found these barriers built across the paths—the honourable paths—you longed to walk in.

“And yet—my God!—those months of utter oneness on the Apuan hills, two made one—were they not heaven?—akin to heaven? Is not such love sacred? Does it not ennoble—redeem? And what of the marriages which destroy and brutalise?

“I wear myself out with thinking. But in the end the Great Ghosts beat me down. I submit. We did wrong; we broke a law which is there to defend men and women from themselves; there to save the State; and that City of God which is within the State; and greater than it. We need not have broken it. With more patience, could I not have borne my life—and mended it? I had my children.

“And yet if I had never had you!—Alec, Alec, my darling! How can I bear even to imagine a life into which you had never come?

"My head aches with thinking, and my heart with feeling. Then something seems to say to me— 'Shall that power that made man's heart not feel?—shall it not understand—shall it not pity? Lie still, poor soul!—lie still, and *hope!*'

"There!—the sun is up, and the lime leaves are rustling outside. Good-bye, Alec!—Good-bye!"

Carrie spent the morning, with Joyce's help, in arranging her child's room—a white room with a flowery paper looking on the garden. Aunt Libby's doll's house, with a vast array of dolls, all dressed in the fashion of 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition when the doll's house was bought, was moved into it. It had three stories, and the sitting-rooms had mahogany doors, and pictures by Sir Edwin Landseer on the walls, and grates filled with red tissue paper to represent fires. Carrie went shopping also, and returned, tottering, but triumphant, with various new books, a doll, and some picture-puzzles.

"But we won't overdo her with things!" she said to Joyce, half smiling, half grave. "Life in this house is so overdone with things—so choked!"

Then after luncheon Carina came—a serious, pale little girl—intimidated by the vast house, the strange people, above all by the strange mother, whose love for her, however restrained, was at first positively frightening to the child. She shrank into herself, and behind her nurse. Carrie used all her arts, and with what seemed to her a most unnatural discretion. But to little purpose. At last, after tea, Joyce separated them by force, and took Carrie into the garden, and made her rest in a long chair, while she sat beside her, crooning.

"Shall I have *time* to make her love me, Joyce?"

said Carrie, piteously. "She's like a caged bird. Every time you open the door, she seems to look through it, as though she just longed to escape!"

"Give her two days, and don't be always thinking about her," laughed Joyce. "Try to behave—sometimes—as if she wasn't there."

Caroline lay still for a little, and then said—

"If I'm not to think about her, I must have something else to think about. Joyce, come here!"

Joyce came—apprehensively; and Caroline took the girl's face in her two hands.

"Joyce, why did Jim Durrant go away so early last night after dinner? You sent him away!"

The girl's cheeks took fire.

"He wanted something I can't give him," she said quietly. "But he promised to forget it, and come to-day—to dinner—just as usual."

"As if either you or I could do without him! Don't wriggle, Joyce!—you know it's true. Well, I wrote to him, this morning—a little note—I dropped it while I was out. I said—'If Joyce doesn't know how to give you a proper answer, I shall have to give it for her. Please come and see her—and me—as soon after five o'clock as convenient.'"

"Caroline! you didn't!" said Joyce, aghast.

Carrie fell back in her chair.

"I did—and you know that you are not to agitate—or excite me!" She held up a finger of mock warning, but her eyes danced.

"Carrie, darling—you know I can't marry him!"

"Why not?"

"Because I have got just forty pounds a year. And he must marry someone with money—or if not—with a family who can help him on."

"Who told you so?"



Joyce coloured again.

"I heard Lord Wing say so," she said, after a moment. "I think he meant me to hear. He said it to Sir Oliver Lewson, one evening, looking at me. It wasn't unkind. It was quite true, and wise. Don't try and upset things, Caroline!" She pleaded with all her eyes. But Carrie only laughed.

"It isn't Alec's affair—it's mine. Sick folk must have their way. Jim has quite enough for two. Alec's notions are so lordly! And I squared the Duchess long ago; and she's talked to his mother and sisters. You know what a fancy he has for you, Joyce! And really they were perfectly meek. It's all right. I can't have you playing the martyr any more—though I know there's nothing that you love so much. And Jim shan't be put upon. He'll be here at half-past five, at latest. I shall then retire. You will have the garden to yourselves. And at six o'clock, I request the pleasure of Mr. Jim Durrant, and Mrs. Jim Durrant—that is to be—in the yellow drawing-room."

Joyce sat on the grass, in a white frock, with her feet tucked under her, arguing and remonstrating in vain. Caroline just lay still, laughing her sweet, tired laugh.

Captain Durrant arrived at half-past five. Every possible advantage was taken of Joyce. And by six o'clock, three people in the yellow drawing-room were laughing and talking, all at the same moment; holding each other's hands, accusing each other of tyranny, or shyness, or hypocrisy, and to all appearance as happy as two engaged people and their best friend and fairy godmother need wish to be.

And yet none of them forgot for a moment the shadow at the door. Such are the many phases of this long play-acting we call our life.

"May I come in?"

Caroline's face lit up with sudden delight. She was lying on her sofa in her own sitting-room, a book on her lap. But her hands were upon it; and her eyes were shut. Her dark hour was once more upon her; the old horrible feeling as of a trapped and captured creature.

But the soft voice roused her. Forty-eight hours had passed, and this was the first time Carina of her own free will had approached her mother's room. Towards all the amusements which had been provided for her she had behaved like the shy birds in winter who will not come near the plates piled with breadcrumbs we have placed on the snowy window-sill, because they see or guess at the watching human eyes behind; and at the slightest movement they scatter to the winds. So it had been with Carina. Half-whispered "No's" and "Yes's"—"Thank-you's" and "No, thank you's"—had been her only form of conversation, except with the maid she had brought with her, and any attempt at caresses on Carrie's or Joyce's part would send her retreating to the maid's skirts, where she would sit reading an old story-book, or nursing an old doll of her own, sometimes raising her beautiful long-lashed eyes to look intently at some person or thing presented to her. Carrie, after the failure of her first attempts, had tried to follow Joyce's advice, and not to court the child so hungrily. But she had felt repelled and sad: Was even this light, this sweetness, in so dark a scene, to be refused her?

But Carina stole softly in, and Carrie smiled at her. The child came up to the mother's side, and let Carrie take her hand.

"Are you resting?" she said timidly. Her eyes considered her mother's face.

"Yes, darling, I have been ill, you see. Have you been in the garden with Cousin Joyce?"

"Yes." A moment's pause. "Do you like being stroked?"

"Very much. Can you stroke?"

"I stroke Grannie's head when it aches. May I stroke your hand?"

Carrie eagerly turned back the lace sleeve of her dress, and put a thin white hand and arm on the child's lap.

Carina had found a stool to sit on. With fingers light as butterflies' wings she moved up and down over the white flesh. Her flushed face, her soft compressed lips showed her earnestness in her task.

"Grannie's arm is so wrinkled," she said, at last, looking up.

"Grannie is an old lady, darling. We shall all be wrinkled when we are old."

"You are not old," said Carina, and her gaze seemed to envelop her mother, the delicate form lying there, under the silk coverlet, and the face which smiled at her. Then with a sudden movement, she slipped from her stool to her knees, laid her head on Caroline's shoulder, and stole an arm round Caroline's neck. Carrie felt a throb of exquisite pleasure. She turned her own dark head, and kissed the child's cheek. Carina returned it with a thistle-down touch of the lips, very quick and shy.

"Darling!" murmured Carrie, her eyes dimming.

"I should like to call you 'Mummy,'" said Carina, gravely. "May I? My little friends—Elsie Watson, you know, and Jenny Holmes"—she nodded confidentially—"always call their mothers, 'Mummy.' Only"—she hesitated, with a puzzled look—"their mummies never go away."

Carrie was silent. Under her closed lids, two tears made their way. She raised her free hand and brushed them off hastily, hoping that in the shadowed room—for the outer blinds were drawn against a hot sun—Carina had not seen them. Then she said, with difficulty—

“Even if Mummy—does go away—you won’t forget her now, Carina?”

“No, not *now*,” murmured Carina, with an emphasis on the word, and nestling up closer to her mother, she lay there with her face buried, her long golden-brown hair covering Carrie’s white dress, and Carrie, clasping the little form passionately to her, went through one of those mingled moments of purest joy and sharpest anguish which strain the heart-strings of women.

A few days later Sir Oliver Lewson coming from the London office of the Wing estates turned into a street beaten with summer rain, and knocked at the door of Lady Theodora Webb. He had not seen her for long. Before he knew the Wings, Lady Theodora had represented to him merely an old friend of his mother’s, with a large command of caustic gossip. Now that he was Wing’s agent, and Lady Wing’s friend, his visits to Lady Theodora were made in rather the spirit of one who keeps an enemy under observation. And the pugnacious quality in her made her always glad to see him. To talk ill-naturedly of the Wings to those who had already banned them, or sent them to Coventry, was much less stimulating than to make a friend and defender of theirs uncomfortable.

But she barely now succeeded in making Sir Oliver uncomfortable. The malice in her talk was too evident. And, moreover, he knew so very much more about the Wings. However he still wished to find out periodically what she was “at.”

He found her at tea, and with her a fair-haired woman in the most fashionable and fantastic of gowns. He recognised Mrs. Whitton—with annoyance. Lady Theodora was an open and clumsy foe. But in the case of Madge Whitton his mind had been full for some time past of suspicions and surmises, and all of them disagreeable. Nothing could be less open than Mrs. Whitton; and he believed her unfailingly adroit.

But he was wrong, as he presently discovered. For in the course of the tea-table chatter, Madge Whitton, out of sheer vanity, and perhaps, too, out of pique—since she had long since detected that Lewson who had once belonged to the band of her admirers now disliked and thought ill of her—fell into an astonishing indiscretion. The talk came round quickly to the Wings and Eltham House, as Lewson knew it must. Lady Theodora understood that Lady Wing was now entertaining every week. Never, so she heard, had the throng of men been more brilliant. Evidently, then, there was no truth in the report of failing health.

Sir Oliver did not contradict her.

And what, she sarcastically asked, was known of Alec? Had he yet had enough of the Andes? His flight no doubt had been a sensible step after the hopeless fiasco of March. Never had anyone made a more ridiculous mess of things. Still an English peer, with half a dozen estates, could hardly spend his life in the Andes. Poor Lady Wing!—it certainly left her in a strange position. Had anyone, might she ask, the smallest idea where he was?

Lewson evaded the question. "We expect him home in a few weeks," he said, confidently. But as he spoke, he caught Madge Whitton's eyes upon him, and the queer triumphant gleam in them.

"He was at Santiago a month ago," she said quickly.

The look which Lewson turned upon her had been learnt in an Indian law-court. She flushed hotly.

"You have heard from him?"

"Just a line," she said carelessly. "I have no idea where he is now. He had promised to send me news of a Spanish friend of mine in Santiago."

Lewson cautiously cross-examined her a little further, so as to satisfy himself that she had no recent information, without suggesting that Wing's wife had none. Then he took his leave, and walked meditatively westwards. "She has been in correspondence with him," he reflected, "while neither his wife nor I have had a word. By George! I never thought that little woman would turn out such a minx!"

For by now his confidential knowledge—as Wing's agent and general factotum—of the financial transactions in which Alec Wing had befriended her was a good deal more accurate and extensive than Mrs. Whitton at all suspected.

The gathering at Eltham House some ten days later than this was long remembered as a landmark in London social history.

In the first place, for the splendour of its setting. All the rooms of the great house were open. The famous pictures showed to greater advantage than ever, owing to the rehanging that Caroline had had the strength to direct. Flowers were everywhere, and a softened light in which the treasures the house contained seemed to unfold all the secrets that art and age had stored in them, like plants in a favouring atmosphere. There was no crowd, yet no emptiness. There was occasional music for those who wished it, in one of the drawing-rooms, but no other entertainment. Talk was the real business of the evening, and Caroline

guided it—"a life, a presence like the air"—now moving slowly from room to room, generally with Washington beside her, chatting here, introducing there, and leaving everywhere the impression of a frail and gracious loveliness, which many a guest turned to watch with lingering eyes, as though some mysterious breath of warning had passed with her.

The Duchess came early—"to help Carrie"—and wore an anxious brow. "Are you fit for it?" she said peremptorily before the first guests arrived. "Just show yourself—go through the rooms—then off to bed!—we'll do the rest." But Caroline laughed her to scorn. She had put some rouge on for the first time in her life—a mere touch—but it gave her brilliance. The Duchess noticed it with a pang, and noticed, too, that the beautiful shoulders and bosom were entirely covered by the dress of white embroidered crêpe which flowed plainly from throat to foot, adorned only by a necklace of sapphires in an old Spanish setting which Wing had given her in Italy.

Washington, Llewellyn, other members of the Cabinet, the Ambassador, politicians of both parties, diplomats, artists, writers, rich folk and poor folk, in evening or morning dress, as the individual chose:—the intellectual life of England was nobly represented in the animated scene. The tawdry or vulgar elements of the earlier gatherings had disappeared. It was as though Caroline's personality had sifted out the self-seekers, the braggarts, and the posers. Everyone—men and women—felt themselves parts of a whole, contributing to a kind of human orchestra, each playing his or her best, but in harmony; none overlooked or out of tune.

Llewellyn and Sir Oliver stood chatting beside an open doorway whence they commanded a wide view.

"A remarkable thing, these evenings," said Llewellyn presently, his eye wandering over the different groups in sight. "It is easy to get an aristocratic mob together in a fine house; it is easy—comparatively—to start a literary coterie; but this is *society*, grouped round a single figure — a single influence — and that, of course, a woman's! It has always happened so; but not often in England. Lady Wing has found the way."

The eyes of both men paused affectionately on the slender figure in white moving through a distant room. Then Lewson was conscious of a contraction in the throat, a mist in the eyes.

"Let us make much of it," he said, in a voice that only Llewellyn heard; "while we have it—and her."

Llewellyn threw him a startled look. The two men fell into silence, watching their hostess till she disappeared from view.

Midnight had struck, and the guests of Eltham House were beginning to make their way towards the supper-room, when a late traveller descended from a Folkestone train at Charing Cross, and leaving a servant to look after his luggage and the custom-house, stepped into a taxi, telling the driver to make haste.

"Where to, sir?"

"Eltham House. Be quick!"

The taxi sped along King William Street, and through Trafalgar Square. The night was balmy; and the great city, with its brilliant streets crowded by an outward-flowing stream from the theatres and music-halls, spoke welcome to an exile who had grown by now very tired of the caprice which had sent him to the wilds. Alec Wing, in the open taxi, looked out on London, and wondered why he had ever left it. But



his expression was by no means merely that of a man delighted to come home.

"Perhaps I shall find the house shut up. She is very likely gone to the country. I suppose I ought to have cabled. But if she has been amusing herself as they say, I don't matter to her, and I'm not bound to consider her. Well, I dare say it was my fault."

He looked gloomily out of the window at the passing motors in St. James's Street. He was thinking of a letter in his pocket, a letter which in fact had finally brought him home, in a manner no less sudden and capricious than that of his outward journey. It was a letter from a woman he despised, a woman he longed to break with finally. All the same it had been the only news from home which he had received since the beginning of May. Something must have happened to his letters. Someone had blundered—himself probably. He knew that he had given only the most casual directions. But there was the fact, that on his descent from the mountains about the middle of June, he had found Madge Whitton's crowded sheets waiting for him at a provincial town, and nothing from home, nothing from Carrie. The fact had made him angry—he was so easily made angry! It had disposed him to give some credit to Madge Whitton's gossip; though he perfectly understood that Madge disliked Carrie and was jealous of her. He saw through much of her talk; but some stuck and rankled. So Carrie was giving parties again?—sending out invitations at any rate—Madge had seen one for the 14th of June. Well, he had told her to do it. But it meant, of course, that she couldn't be missing him very much. No doubt Melton had been making way with her. Nobody like your virtuous prig for taking advantage of an absent husband. Yet he wondered that Carrie could put up

with him—a prince of milksops! Anyone who had been at school with him knew that.

Well, if there was to be a breach between him and Carrie—a final breach—better get it over, and have done with it! He seemed to have offended her mortally, and she had retaliated. A bad business. But that was the way in which adventures like theirs did end too often. His heart was bitter; savage with himself, and savage with her. And all the time there was an obsession in his mind—a vision of Carrie in her glorious young beauty among the acacias and the broom on the Apuan hills.

“Good Heavens—a party—this very night!”

He stretched out of the window, to see the whole street in front of Eltham House packed with waiting carriages; so that it was with difficulty he made his way to the gates.

“Set me down outside,” he called peremptorily to the driver. “I’ll walk in.”

“Move on there!” cried a policeman as the taxi stopped. But Wing was already on the pavement, and throwing the man his fare, he dived through a rank of slowly-moving cars, and made for a side door, on the extreme left, which was used on reception nights as a servants’ entrance. He dashed into it through an out-coming throng of footmen who looked at him in astonishment. Inside he found himself in a broad basement corridor, a part of his own house quite unknown to him, with rooms opening out of it, where the chauffeurs and the footmen had been having supper. Everybody stared at him; nobody knew the tall handsome man in the light overcoat, till he suddenly saw in front of him a couple of men in the Wing livery, at the foot of a staircase. One of them he remembered.

"Hutchins!" he called, as he approached them.

The man turned in amazement, and stood gaping.

"I have come home, Hutchins, unexpectedly. Lady Wing doesn't seem to have received my telegrams, nor I hers. Well, now—I don't want to alarm her, and I can't appear in these clothes. I have no doubt you can find me some. My luggage won't be here for half an hour. I'll go up this way. Say nothing, please, to anyone."

His peremptory gesture included the two men; and he hurried up the staircase, followed by the astounded valet, and by the looks of all below.

A little later, Caroline in the south drawing-room was listening to the praise that Washington and the Ambassador were freely bestowing on the arrangement of a fine group of French pictures—Paters and Lancrets—with which she had taken particular pains. Washington happened to know, or guess why; because he remembered that Wing had been especially proud of his French pictures, about which, indeed, he knew a good deal. The Ambassador went from one to another, holding up his hands in delight, and saying things that sounded amazingly clever to Washington, who, on the subject of pictures, had no small-talk whatever. Caroline had smiled at first, pleased by their compliments. Then she fell silent; and Washington, looking round at her, received a sudden shock. She was standing motionless in the centre of the now almost empty room, conspicuous in her straight white gown, over which Joyce, the ever-watchful, had just thrown a silk wrap, lest the night air from the many open windows, blowing through the cooling house, should bring chill to one who was in truth an invalid. The wrap was of a bright flame colour. Carrie had gathered the dazzling

folds of it about her with an absent hand, and Washington saw that she was quite unconscious of the persons near her, and seemed to be absorbed in some thought or dream of her own. Her eyes, wide open, were fixed on one of the noblest possessions of the house, the Reynolds boy, visible under a brilliant light through the doorway on the left; her lips parted eagerly. He almost thought she spoke, though not to him or the Ambassador. And at the same moment he perceived, for the first time, that she was rouged, and that her face, but for the bright incongruous spots on either cheek, was ghastly, the eyes straining from dark pits of shade, the mouth bloodless. A thrill of horror ran through him; he moved towards her to speak to her, and take her hand; and as he did so, he perceived Lord Melton, who had just come into the room, and stood like himself, transfixed, gazing at the central figure; while the Ambassador, still babbling art-criticism, stood with his nose in the pictures, and his back to the others.

And behind Lord Melton there was a hurrying woman—the Duchess, with ribbons and skirts flying, dropping fan and handkerchief as she ran.

“Darling Carrie!”

Caroline started—looked at the new-comer in bewilderment.

“Yes—what is it?”

The Duchess took her hands, panting—and kissed her.

“Dear Carrie!—such a wonderful thing has happened! Guess!”

The colour rushed into Carrie’s face.

“Alec!” she said gasping, and Washington saw her put her hand over her heart.

Then, behind the Duchess, a man in evening dress

came rapidly forward. He had reached the middle of the next room in the suite, beyond the open doorway towards which they were all looking, when Caroline perceived him. She gave one cry, and began to run. On the way she tottered. Melton rushed towards her, but Alec Wing thrust him fiercely aside, and caught her as she fell.

*"My God!—Carrie—my God!"*

He carried her to her room, and while she lay unconscious, and doctors were being summoned, it was the Duchess who told Alec Wing the truth, the whole bitter irrevocable truth. It broke down the nerves of a selfish, arrogant, but not altogether heartless man, and he fell into a passion of grief beside the helpless form of his wife.

When in the early light, Caroline recovered consciousness with only her husband and a nurse beside her, she called feebly for Joyce, who with a doctor was in the next room. Joyce came and Carrie whispered to her.

"Send Carina home. She mustn't see me again—comfort her—if you can. I kissed her last night—just before people came—in her sleep."

Then she turned to Alec, and laying her cheek against his, she said drowsily—"I shall be all right now—sweetheart!"

But from that day forward, the deadly mischief which had already returned upon her, made rapid progress. She lived for six weeks after Wing's return, then, on his breast, she died. London held its breath beside the tragedy, and there was true grief in many hearts.

On the day of her burying, Washington, who had broken every political engagement to go to the

memorial service in the morning, came home alone and very sad, from the House of Commons. His wife was expected that evening from the north, where she had been paying a visit. He had not pressed her to return for the service, and she had not offered it. He could not help indeed being glad that she was away.

The House had risen early, and the summer day was long. Washington sat in the twilight garden, snatching half an hour's rest before a heavy evening's work, and thinking over the life which had just closed. He was a convinced Christian, no less than his wife, and he was conscious of no incongruity between the traditional Christian creed and all the other knowledge and stored reflection of a powerful mind. The words of the psalms and hymns he had heard that morning ran through his memory, vaguely soothing him, and that other saying which no Christian in thinking about Caroline Wing could possibly forget :

*Her sins are forgiven—for she loved much!*

Yes, she had loved much—and how wastefully! What was left of all that love and charm? Alec Wing would forget her before long, would return, absolved, to political life, and make in time—probably soon—a second marriage which would complete his rehabilitation. Her child might remember her for a little. Her cousin and friend would mourn her sincerely. And a bright memory and legend of her as something rare—something perhaps unique—would linger no doubt for years in the society through which she had passed, over which she had so briefly reigned. But when all was said, how little!—compared with the enchanting beauty, the passionate joys and sufferings, the magic, the kindness, and the grace of the living woman.

Washington was glad to have known her; he wished he had known her better. And his thoughts at last

fell into words of a dirge-like music, words long familiar to him, and to all for whom English poetry is a mother tongue :—

“Rose Aylmer ! whom these waking eyes  
May weep but never see—  
A night of memories and of sighs,  
I consecrate to thee !”

He breathed the verse into the silence of the garden, bowing his head upon his hands. The name of that other beauty long dead, enshrined in it, mattered nothing. The name had become universal. It stood for all the lovely and the lost, and fitted Caroline, as it would fit others for generations.

Then, lest his wife should return upon him unawares, before he was ready or able to speak to her of the day's events, he rose and went heavily to his work.

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